

Partially Kissed Hero
Chapter One
by Lionheart

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Every so often the entire Harry Potter universe offends me so deeply that I just have to react by folding, spindling and mutilating it.

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Harry Potter had an epiphany.

It was really a very simple one, actually. Once he'd inflated his Aunt Marge in the first week after school let out he'd fled to the Leaky Cauldron and met Minister Fudge, then he'd been told that a very dangerous criminal was on the loose, and after him.

But they hadn't told him very much, only that he was in danger.

While wandering Diagon Alley the next day and passing by the bookshop, the most wonderful idea had come to Harry, and he had popped in to buy a book on Sirius Black to find out more about this dangerous criminal, to know more so he could better avoid him.

The kind clerk had directed him to the wizarding biographies section, and there, two shelves down from all of the books on Lockhart, was a whole shelf devoted entirely to Harry...

... and his family.

The young child didn't leave the bookshop except to eat or sleep for days. Finally, Mr Flourish gave him a copy of every book on that shelf as a gift to get the boy out in the clear air and sunlight again.

But Harry had learned an amazing amount, and finally understood what his best female friend found so fascinating about books. No one had ever told him so much as three words strung together about his

family, but there in the bookstore all that time had been entire biographies of the Potter family line, the exploits of his famous parents, and... it was meat and drink to the poor child, who'd always before considered himself an orphan, unloved and, though he didn't put it into exact words, unlovable.

But there in those books, he'd learned that he had very much in common, personality wise, with his father, and many traits in common with his mother. On learning they had skills and specialties Harry himself wasn't pursuing, the child sent off a letter to Professor McGonagall changing his electives this coming year. He'd like to study Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, like his mother had done before him.

So much for an easy class with Ron, but he wanted to see what made his mother love those courses so much, and so it was back to Flourish and Blotts to buy the necessary textbooks, and so eager was he that he started to read all of his textbooks, so he could get a start on his coursework early.

Then, finding his past two years of slacking off with Ron had not served him well, Harry went back over the last two years of books and material, filling in holes formed by him goofing off.

He even wrote to Hermione, asking if she could mail him photocopies of her last two years of notes, and asking if she knew of a muggleborn Ravenclaw in their year they could ask for notes covering the material she had missed after having been turned to stone.

Hermione wrote him right back with several books worth of thick stacks of parchment covering her two years of study, and a note that she'd ask for a reference through McGonagall about whom to get other notes from.

Hermione'd even congratulated Harry on having a great idea!

Having read half a page congratulating him on finally getting serious about his studies, the Boy-Who-Lived felt renewed vigor about pursuing them, and dove into the material like a boy discovering candy for the first time.

Or, more appropriately, like a boy who had just discovered something about his much-loved and absent parents, and wanted to be like them in more than just looks.

Harry had discovered an identity. His mother had been a genius on Charms, while his father was a master of Transfiguration. They had been excellent students, both of them, and he wanted them to be proud of him. So he went around to all of the people in the Alley asking for tips and pointers on how to better master his crafts and be more like his genius parents.

Mr. Flourish ended up leading him to several stacks of supplementary reading on those subjects, and others, and Harry spent more than was probably wise collecting those books and others to help him on his chosen course of study.

After the very first gift of books, Harry found his trunk too small to fit his new collection, but this new set was larger than the trunk itself, so it was obvious that he'd have to do something before he had to pack before going back to Hogwarts. So he asked Mr. Flourish, and got directed by the friendly shopkeeper over to where he could buy a specialty one.

Looking around the wizarding luggage shop, Harry ended up purchasing four traveling bookcases instead of a larger trunk. They were full size, floor to ceiling rosewood bookcases with glass fronts to protect the books from dust and each unit had two halves that folded together like a locket. When closed it looked like a large steamer trunk, about eight feet tall and four feet on each side, but when opened it was just two bookcases joined by a hinge in the center. And the whole thing shrank down to the size of a pack of bubblegum without him having to use any magic, just activating built-in charms.

Because they were travel luggage for wizard-kind, they came with a whole slew of protective enchantments against jostling, breakage, wear or so on. They were really quite remarkable, and so useful Harry couldn't help but buy a matching desk to go with them. Those tables in the common room were too few for the amount of students

needing to do work on them, and they were at the wrong height anyway.

Thinking ahead, Harry bought two plush desk chairs, one for himself and one for Hermione, because he knew the bushy haired witch wouldn't let him monopolize that big desk all on his own. In fact, he got one that had extra drawers, because he knew otherwise she'd end up taking them all.

He thought about getting a chair for Ron, but decided against it, as the desk only had room to store two within itself for its compact form, and his best male friend would probably shrink at having to join them at a desk instead of those deep, plush common room sofas anyway.

The furniture salesman told his new client that the desk didn't come with its own writing set, so sent him off to another store to pick up supplies, like parchment, to stock it with.

Harry came out of that store with a selection of auto-notes quills and other handy stationary supplies for making his schoolwork easier that he'd never have imagined without having gone shopping in a specialty store. But, having just asked Hermione for copies of her notes, he realized just how lazy he'd been on taking his own, and seen all sorts of easy ways to rectify that there.

He'd even given the lady at the stationary store Hermione's collection of looseleaf notes, and she'd bound them in covers like their own books. Harry got two sets made, one for himself, and one as a gift for Hermione, thinking she'd appreciate that.

Once again, Ron wouldn't care, so no point bothering. He'd just end up losing his set, if they got him one, and borrowing theirs anyway.

Back at the Cauldron that night, Harry spilled an open bottle of ink over his pants as he was putting all of this away. Thinking at first that it was a small loss, as they were Dudley's old trousers, he'd been brought up short by the magic mirror on the wall scolding him for looking scruffy all the time.

The next morning, the boy went shopping at Gladrags. He already had school robes, so Madam Malkins was out as unnecessary, but ordinary everyday stuff to wear when he wasn't in his school robes was desperately needed.

Then it was back to the luggage shop to purchase a stand alone closet (called a wardrobe) to hold his new attire in.

Harry had just read that morning that his mother had been a genius prodigy at Potions. And, determined not to let Snape deprive him of his family's legacy, Harry went to the apothecary and purchased a complete set of masters level equipment. Then, seeing as how there was no place to set all that up at the Cauldron, it was back to the luggage shop to buy a folding set of cabinets, like his bookcases, and another desk to put it on.

They had a Portable Potions Lab set that came with its own model of desk and two counters, all with underslung cabinets, specimen storage and tool drawers. That set came with features like splash guards and so on, that had Harry wishing he'd known about those before starting Hogwarts, as it would have saved him no end of problems (and sabotage from Slytherins).

Seeing the boy juggle so much in his arms, and with overstuffed pockets, the salesman at the luggage store sent him on to a related business, where they sold Safari garb, and the owner there ignored all of the child's requests and outfitted Harry with everything, the full kit and kaboodle, everything from pith helmet and light beige travel outfits with lots of pockets, like you'd see in old pictures of British explorers in the 19th century, to ever-expanding weightless bags, belts whose pouches would store and organize a tremendous amount of safari gear, tools for taking specimens, and everything the old gentry might need out in the wild - down to and including beads charmed to be attractive to natives in case you'd like to trade for their services as guides or bearers or whatever.

The Boy-Who-Lived never even got a chance to object as he was loaded down with a complete set of equipment, including one of the largest and most feature-heavy magical tents on the market, and a magical compass that he could make no sense of.

It was far more than Harry wanted, but he did end up wearing the belt, as it had wonderful functions, including the ability to store just about everything else in its self-cataloging pouches. So he had an easy place to store his self-shrinking bookcases, cabinets and desks for when he needed them, and he loaded in the rest of this stuff so he didn't have to make room for it all in his trunk, which could never have held half of it anyway.

Actually, those boots the explorer's shop had sold him fit better than any of Dudley's old castoffs, and were more comfortable too, so he took to wearing a pair of those as well (one Safari kit contained several sets of boots just as spares in case one were to get bitten by a crocodile or whatever).

Then it was back to the apothecary to pick up extra self-stirring rods and a set of silver cauldrons, as his new portable lab promised him the ability to brew a dozen potions simultaneously, if he had the gear to do it. One of the requirements was a higher-end of self-stirring rod that could take detailed instructions, like 'so many turns counter-clockwise, one turn reversed', and so on. Those, and multiple sets of measuring cups and spoons with the same capabilities, were all required gear for the extra functions of the lab.

That was the real trick about multiple brewing, as it took complicated recipes and reduced them to only occasional hands-on steps. And those grew fewer if you added in the optional automated silver potions knives that could slice, dice, cut to specified dimensions, chop, crush or shred fine all on their own, and accept programming to do this to an entire list of ingredients in order.

Harry got a full set of the knives. Expensive, but worth it.

Then it was back to the bookstore, where Mr. Flourish sold him a book that was not on the Hogwarts equipment sheet, but every Slytherin bought a copy of shortly after being sorted into that house.

And, true enough, it had more on proper potion making procedures and the rules behind why to stir this way instead of that, what ingredients did and how to combine them properly, as well as how to

prepare your ingredients in the first place, than Harry had ever imagined before.

So he bought two extra copies and sent them off to Hermione and Ron.

Then he went back and bought copies of Hermione's favorite extra reading, including *Hogwarts: A History*, the *Rise and Fall of The Dark Arts*, *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*, and that book they'd found so useful last year: *Moste Potente Potions*.

Mindful of how Snape had taken that copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* from him in their first year on no pretext at all, Harry also had his entire collection stamped with bookplates: *Property of Harry Potter*.

Thus outfitted, Harry's summer disappeared in a haze of earnest study and practice, drawing on the accumulated skills of those in the entire Alley to ask questions from and act as his tutors.

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Harry had purchased a beginner's guide to chess, and had been practicing against others in the Alley using that wizarding chess set he'd gotten for his first Christmas at Hogwarts, usually while potions were simmering on the burners of his portable lab set up behind him.

Ron only used two or three strategies most of the time, and now Harry could recognize and beat them. He was truly looking forward to having a good year. There was so much he'd wanted to talk over with Hermione that Hedwig had been getting the workout of her life delivering their letters back and forth to each other that summer.

Hermione had even spoken about getting an owl of her own so they could keep that rotation going faster, but it would have to be next summer, as this one was rapidly coming to an end, and they wouldn't need letters to speak to each other at Hogwarts.

Harry had always been bright, but the Dursleys had done all they could to stamp that out of him, as well as his magic. Then he'd

befriended Ron, who had lazy practically tattooed on his forehead, and wanting to get along with his first ever friend had gotten Harry to emulate his actions.

Learning about his parents, their good grades, great accomplishments and skill at the arts had been just the boot to the pants he'd needed to get out of that rut. And, while he was not up at Hermione's level yet, Harry was getting there fast.

Hermione was so pleased with him and their discussions that she'd already gotten her parents to extend an invitation for Harry to join them over the Christmas holiday. They were planning to spend the vacation in France, and Hermione had pointed him to a nifty magic device Harry had never heard of before: Language Lozenges.

You took it like a cough drop, only instead of soothing throats it taught a language, just like you'd been born to speak it. They cost only a handful of galleons (no more than seven apiece), and it took about a week to absorb the knowledge properly, better if you used it during that period. But it was best not to take more than one at a time, as it got confusing if you mixed them.

Harry had already bought a set. At the Safari store the clerk had sold him the entire collection of world languages in lozenge form, only Harry hadn't known what they'd done at the time.

So, on Hermione having enlightened him, he'd taken the one for French, and a week after that the one for Latin (to help with his schoolwork), and his latest was to venture into Old Norse, as Hermione was excited to tell him that gave her a real advantage in studying ahead on their Ancient Runes course.

They were planning to get together and take Egyptian, Hebrew, Sumerian and Babylonian during the year, as those all had strong magical cultures attached to them and would aid their studies enormously.

Harry was planning to get her a complete set, instead of the few Hermione could afford for herself, as he was also hoping to get to other languages. Greek had a strong influence on western magic, as

did Celtic, and there were other languages out there that could be of benefit to them in their work. Chinese, in particular, had a strong background in Alchemy.

And Harry was determined not to let Snape rob him of the chance to follow in his mother's work.

As a thank-you gift to his friend for her help and pointing out what those language lozenges were good for, Harry had bought Hermione an expanding featherlight bookbag. It didn't have nearly as much capacity as his traveling bookcases, but was less awkward to use. Then, realizing that, he got one for himself, seeing as it would be awkward to haul bookcases out of his belt pouches to set up inside of class.

It had been an enjoyable summer. Harry read books out in front of the ice cream parlor while his classmates ogled the new broomstick in Quality Quidditch supplies. He'd helped out Neville when the boy lost his booklist (and helped convince his dorm mate to take Arithmancy and Ancient Runes along with him and Hermione, so they'd have someone in their year to talk to about classes. And Augusta Longbottom had beamed down on them as Harry had introduced Neville to the not-so-secret but terribly useful shortcut of taking an Old Norse language lozenge to help study ahead for the class). On Neville saying how useful that would be, Harry even thought ahead and bought a half a dozen extra of that tongue, thinking there were other students who would probably need them.

Hagrid had even come by on a trip to pick up more flesh eating slug repellent and told Harry the secret for handling the Monster Book of Monsters, which Harry had then gone and shared with the staff at Flourish and Blotts, where the assistants practically cried with relief, and the owner gave him loads of store credit, which Harry immediately put to good use on buying more books.

But it also enabled him to study up on the Magical Creatures elective early.

Summer was practically over when his friends arrived, and went through the typical Weasley hurried rush to get everything done at the

last minute. On seeing his friends, Harry clapped Ron on the shoulder and asked, "So, Ron, what did you think of that Potions book I sent you?"

Ron stopped stuffing his cheeks in order to look bashful. "Oh. I dunno. I never looked at it. Fred and George love it, though. They borrowed it from me just after I got it, and I haven't seen it since. You should ask them if you want to know if it's any good or not."

Hermione was practically vibrating in excitement. "Oh! You mean the Basics of Brewing by Vandergeist? I love that book! Harry got me a copy early this summer, and I've read it four times now. It's got the most useful explanations for potions theory and practice! I wish I'd known about that ever so long ago!"

"Bloody hell!" Ron stared at her, plainly horrified at how she could work so hard over anything he felt was trivial.

Harry chose not to mention that he'd read it four times himself, and had even reviewed and brewed most of the first and second year potion syllabus using it, and was already working on third.

Smiling, they went to Magical Menagerie together, where Ron nearly lost his pet rat to the attack of a large cat, Hermione bought that cat, and Harry bought a kneazel, because he'd read the cat-look-alikes were very good at warning you about suspicious or untrustworthy behavior, and with a criminal on the loose looking to kill him, he wanted some early warning in case they were using polyjuice or something like that.

Besides, he could send Hedwig off to live at Hermione's parent's house, so he could stay within the 'one pet per wizard' rule, and that way Hermione could stay in contact with her parents during the school year. Harry didn't have anyone else to write to while he was at school, so it was good for Hedwig to get the exercise, and it should help the family of his best friend to stay in touch with their daughter.

Harry named his kneazel Augustus, or Gus for short.

Having started to use his mind, Harry had begun thinking ahead. He'd even gone so far as to go back to that magical luggage shop and bought a self-shrinking portable kitchen, just like his potions lab, only meant more for food preparation than brewing. And he'd already stocked it with food staples that should last him through next summer, so he'd eat in spite of the Dursleys trying to starve him. On thinking that, he'd also bought a matching Captain's bed, one with a big, lush mattress for sleeping on.

The worst upset of the summer had been getting a letter from Professor McGonagall telling him that it was too late to change his elective classes. The letter arrived too late to do much of anything about it, but once he'd shown it to Hermione, she insisted he still had to try. So, on her suggestion, he'd sent off owls to Dumbledore and the Minister for an appeal.

Harry was a little leery about doing that, but Hermione kept insisting that he HAD to do something! And the Minister was the most helpful person he knew who might have input outside of Dumbledore, and together they had to be able to do SOMETHING about the situation!

It was another small epiphany when Harry realized that his friend didn't want to go to all of those classes without him. And it made him feel good inside.

Next morning, it was once more the typical Weasley last minute rush to get on the train. They actually got there early, but Molly wanted them to come back out once they'd got on so she could give them all last minute advice.

Having learned so much about his real parents, Harry was a great deal less anxious to let Molly Weasley mother him, and probably make him late for the train. So he said his goodbyes quickly and climbed aboard, getting to an empty compartment early, so he could settle down and finish some reading.

Hermione came in quickly after him, for mostly the same reasons.

Neville joined them shortly after that, then a dreamy blonde second year who didn't say anything, just settled down to read a magazine

upside down, and before Harry could say anything Colin Creevey and his brother had also joined in, making for a full compartment.

Ron and Ginny looked in on them briefly, after the train had started moving, but there was no room to sit in the compartment, nor any for squeezing out. Harry was stuck by the window, wedged in farthest from the door, and hoped Ron would find an empty compartment and come back for him, as the one he was in now was kind of crowded, but they didn't see the Weasleys again for the rest of that trip.

It was different riding the train without Ron there yakking on about Quidditch and playing Exploding Snap with him, but Harry managed. He did get to know Neville better, and learned that the second year Ravenclaw girl with them was called Luna. The Creevey brothers were just happy to bask in the glow of being so close to Harry, with Colin snapping the occasional picture.

Then Neville asked for help looking over his summer schoolwork, and Harry and Hermione both dove into that convenient excuse to go over all they'd recently learned, and help out Neville in the bargain.

The sun had set. The trolley had come and gone and the sky was black outside the window when the train started to stop.

"We can't be there yet," Hermione objected, looking at her watch.

Then the lights on the train went out.

"Lumos," Luna said quite calmly, bringing a light to the end of her wand, and popping the cap off of a bottle of chocolate milk. The others followed her example as far as the light went, all lighting up their wands.

"Something's coming aboard," Neville said, peering at half-seen shapes just outside the window.

Peering out into the corridor, they saw several other faces poking out of the other compartments, all of whom shortly followed their example in lighting up the points of their wands - something that made that which followed all that much more horrible.

Long robed figures were not unusual in the magical world, but pasty fleshed creatures that looked rotted, like they'd decomposed in water, were. The horrible creatures drifted inside of the car and went straight at Harry.

There came flashes of light, and a scream, and then nothingness.

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Author's Notes:

The central idea for this change was, "What if Harry had not been in the same compartment as Professor Lupin?" which led to, "Well, if they weren't taking the last compartment on the train then they'd not have had to share with a scruffy old man who looked more than a bit disreputable," and then, "Well, they DID get there early, but Molly insisted on mothering them until the train practically left without them."

So that led to the question of, "So what if Harry excused himself early?" and then had to be asked, "Well, why would he do that?" and so I postulated, "Well, what if he wanted to read a book?" but that didn't stand up on its own, and needed some real shoring up, and that led naturally to, "What could make him a bookworm?" and the answer to that was, "How about a book on that deadly criminal he knows is after him, but that no one will tell him about? That would certainly be motivational enough."

That led to the realization, "Hey, wasn't that the summer he spent in Diagon Alley?" And then I thought, "I can do this."

Yes, I know Colin's brother Dennis only entered school in their fourth year, but have decided that's a trivial enough change I'm going to leave it as is.

Chapter Two by Lionheart

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"Harry! HARRY!!" Hermione slapped her friend's face several times, but he was completely unresponsive.

Luna stepped forward and took a sip of her chocolate milk, then leaned forward to kiss Harry's unresponsive lips, using the action to transfer the chocolate milk from her mouth to his. Then she stroked his neck to urge the fluid down his passage without choking him.

Harry shivered a moment, and his color got slightly better, but he was still deathly pale. A professor came running up, someone they didn't know, which pretty much meant he was this years new DADA teacher. Stopping in quickly to check on Harry, the man exclaimed, "What happened here, what's wrong?"

"The Dementors tried to kiss, Harry," Hermione stated softly, in fear.

"They seemed to like the dark, so I tried to drive them off with a flash of my camera," Colin hefted the device uncertainly.

"The Patronus charging up the hall seemed to help as well," Luna mused, then pondered aloud. "I wonder what happens to a dementor if it's forced to drink chocolate milk?"

"I sent that," Lupin replied, referring to the patronus, ignoring the chocolate milk comment, and still worriedly checking over Harry. "Come, one of you, look after him. I've got to talk to the conductor of this train. We've got to get Harry to Hogwarts as soon as possible. He's still very close to death, I'm afraid. I fear we may not have stopped that dementor in time."

Hermione broke down crying on the spot.

Luna began calmly writing.

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The car was full of eye-witnesses, so news spread across the train very fast that Harry Potter had been at least partially kissed by a dementor. The news was treated very soberly by most, and when Draco chose to gloat about it, an irate seventh year threw him off the moving train as they just happened to be crossing a bridge.

Crabbe and Goyle got thrown off moments later.

The train piled on the steam, going far faster than was usual, and a touch faster than was safe. They arrived at Hogsmead station in record time, and Harry's clammy and unresponsive form was bundled into a waiting carriage, which sped off before all of the others, pouring on speed to get to Hogwarts at the fastest rate possible.

He was met at the front steps by Dumbledore, who'd been alerted by owl, and the old man immediately examined him and pronounced, "Harry is still alive, if only barely. Quickly, we have little time to waste."

The patient was taken immediately to the hospital wing to be treated by Madam Pomphrey, who began feeding him chocolate and potions.

"We're losing him, Albus!" she proclaimed, once the latest potions had failed to take hold and change his condition.

"I think not," the Headmaster calmly replied, raising one arm and calling, "Fawkes!"

The phoenix appeared in a burst of fire, settled on the head of Harry's hospital bed, and began crooning. The boy immediately settled and started showing signs of improvement.

Moments later Pomphrey confirmed that the crisis had passed, and that the phoenix song seemed to have started a recovery. Albus

fondly patted his shoulder, and spoke to the school nurse, "Continue in your care, Poppy. I shall leave Fawkes to keep young Harry company through the night. I feel sure that phoenix song will prove to be the cure needed."

It was a very subdued school who met for the Welcoming Feast in the Great Hall, and though the Headmaster's declaration that Harry would recover did serve to improve the mood somewhat, it never did become a festive atmosphere.

Luna excused herself early to go wandering off into the Forbidden Forest. When she came back, she had a unicorn calmly trotting at her heels, which she led directly into the hospital wing, and which curled up around Harry, nurturing him and licking him like a young foal.

As it did, the chill seemed to break. And that, combined with the phoenix song, seemed to make all of the difference.

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Early at breakfast the next morning, while Harry was still unconscious, owls flew in distributing papers. The very shocking front page article showed a picture taken by Colin Creevey of a very dramatic moment, with a dementor bending low over Harry Potter, extending its tentacles around his face so it could begin to feed, before backing up and starting over again.

The banner headline read, "Ministry Guardians Attempt To Murder Potter!"

The article below that read, "Guardians appointed by the Ministry to protect Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived, from escaped murderer Sirius Black, tried to kill him themselves last night, delivering the dreaded dementor's kiss after stopping the Hogwarts train and incapacitating our..."

Fudge's term of office was over before ten o'clock that morning, as public outcry was nearly insane. His senior undersecretary Dolores Umbridge and most of his administrative staff were removed with him, as his term of office came to an abrupt and very nasty end.

Rumors had it that Aurors had to escort the politicians out of the country for fear of reprisals by angry mobs.

The dementors got withdrawn from around Hogwarts by the interim Minister as detrimental to the very purpose they'd been placed there for, and were gone before Fudge was even out of the country.

Luna's only comment on seeing the front page was to remark that her father must not have had space to publish the story she wrote in the Quibbler due to his ground breaking theory about murtlap poisonings, and so sold it to the Prophet.

The housemate she'd mentioned this to stared down at the byline in frank disbelief to note that, indeed, that article had been written by none other than Luna Lovegood.

Around noon came the heartening news that Harry had woken up just fine.

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Inside Harry's head a very tricky conflict had been waging since last night. A near-kiss by a dementor had triggered off nothing less than a full-on war between Harry's own soul, and the fragment accidentally emplaced by Riddle inside of him, shaken loose from its usual bonds by the soul-sucking nature of the dementor's near kiss. The dementor itself had scarcely been driven off and his soul snapped back into place from the suction that had begun to be applied before Harry found himself in a desperate struggle for survival against a portion of the dark lord's soul which had broken free and wanted to destroy his native one and take his body for its own.

Harry himself was ill prepared for conflict. Having been maltreated and abused his entire life, he did not have a strong sense of self to rely on.

If the blood magic of his mother's sacrifice had been functioning properly, a victory by Voldemort's soul fragment would have been impossible. As it was, however, that sheltering protection had been

so weakened by Petunia's hate that it was only enough to drive off the first few initial assaults, delaying the dark lord's triumph over Lily's child.

The 'initial charge' of Lily's sacrifice had been largely used up in Harry's first year, destroying Quirrel. What was left was enough to flummox the surprise attack by Voldemort's soul and turn it into a protracted struggle. But that was scarcely any guarantee of victory as Harry's mind had to learn to defend itself on no warning, finding itself thrust into battle where it had to fight for its very survival from behind steadily disintegrating shields.

And it was not exactly well-outfitted to do so. Having discovered much about his parents that summer gave Harry a sense of belonging for the first time ever, really, and having studied so long and hard had done something for compensating his prior weakness, proving he had a drive if only he wanted to use it. Those tools, inadequate though they were, were all he had to do battle with in the surprising conflict of wills that sprang up.

On the other hand, he was not fighting against Tom Riddle's whole soul, only a portion of it, and a small portion at that. Plus, Harry's soul had a home turf advantage, in that this was HIS body, and its magic core responded to HIM!

However, he was hampered seriously enough by other issues that would not have been enough of an advantage. Harry was vastly inexperienced in the field of mental combat, and Voldemort was a pure expert. In the end, Harry was only able to hold out, and poorly at that, until relief came. It was the phoenix song provided by Fawkes that made the difference, strengthening the good, while simultaneously weakening the bad, as it was prone to do.

Still, the ravages of Voldemort's soul fragment could and would have crippled the boy but for the nurturing presence of Luna's unicorn. Phoenix song did a great deal of good, but that alone was not enough. Harry's background made him so weak to start with, while Voldemort had such an edge on strength and experience, that phoenix song alone could not guarantee Harry's triumph. It could only equalize them, and it was the unicorn that did the rest, providing him not only

the strength to fight on, but enough mental energy to copy the various tools, tactics and weapons Riddle's soul fragment had been using and turn them back against his assailant.

Actually, the prophecy may have had a hand in that. Voldemort was supposed to "mark him as an equal," not give him a guarantee of Harry's destruction.

And, it was through this odd experience that equality was achieved.

As Voldemort's soul fragment dissolved under the attacks by Light energies upon it, the personality of it was utterly vanquished, while the skills and abilities simply went fluid and became absorbed by the victor, in this case Harry, making him, at last, Voldemort's equal in a very magical way.

The boy had also done a substantial amount of growing up, mentally speaking, as part of their conflict. Underdeveloped places in Harry's mind had been a favored target of the dark lord, as weaker than all others. The only effective counter for those attacks had been to develop those weak points until they were as strong as the others, even if he'd had no other option but to copy the pattern for those developments out of Voldemort's own mind.

Healing magic and the nature of phoenix song and unicorn nurturing had made subtle changes, suppressing the dark, so he was still very much Harry. But it was a much more adult Harry in mind than he'd ever been before, or would likely have become given the conditions he'd been kept under.

Just like an ordinary war takes immature farm boys and turns them rapidly into men, the close and intense nature of the conflict had caused Harry to develop far more rapidly than normal, and overcome emplaced blocks upon his mind and magic, as those, too, had been favorite targets of his enemy, weak points that could not be allowed to remain if he was to survive.

His survival had mandated such development. It had not been optional, there had been no room for weakness, and no mercy from his enemy in that fight. There was nothing too dirty for Voldemort to

do, no tactic dishonorable if it gave him the slightest advantage. So Harry's mind had been forced to fortify itself in every particular, and now he was, truly, the dark lord's equal.

Harry had his enemy's power, but he had also gained Tom Riddle's memories, recalling people, places and objects unknown to him before. It gave him some insights having seen into the dark lord's character, but also revealed Tom's secrets.

Although, while their skills and abilities were equal, their circumstances in life certainly were not. Voldemort had enacted several dark rituals to empower him to greater than ordinary levels, granting him additional abilities. He also preferred Dark magic over Light, so many of his skills were things that Harry could not ever bring himself to do. His horcruxes were one such advantage, something that Harry wouldn't ever bring himself to duplicate.

However, Voldemort was also presently a wraith without a body.

Harry had a body, which would seem to grant him an advantage. But, as if to compensate for that, there was Voldemort's cadre of followers, and the so-called Light side working so very hard to keep Harry under tight control, effectively imprisoning him.

Aside from followers, the Dark Lord and Harry's circumstances were, while not being identical, almost surprisingly equal. Both had substantial restriction placed on their actions, and neither had access to most of Riddle's powers at the moment. Harry, because he would not use them, and Voldemort because he could not.

It was dawn before Tom Riddle's soul fragment was entirely dissolved, and it took until noon for Harry's mind to accept and integrate the new skills, then finally adapt to the change, which it had to do before it could wake up.

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"Harry!"

Harry found himself enveloped in a Hermione-hug before he'd even reached the Gryffindor table. "How did you get released? You'd better not have snuck out! Madam Pomphrey, I'm sure, would want to look you over for longer than she..."

Harry interrupted his best friend's rant with a laugh, before picking her up by her waist and bodily swinging her around, to which she responded with a startled yet happy squeal.

Placing her back down again, Harry answered, "Yes, Hermione, I got released. Professor Dumbledore said if I could go out and circulate with my friends it would probably help me get better, faster. Happiness is the antithesis to a dementor's powers, and no one is happy stuck in a hospital bed."

Hermione quite happily dragged him off to where they could have lunch together. Ron was already there, stuffing his face. "Blimey, Harry. Don't scare us like that!"

The Boy-Who-Lived smiled. "Thanks for caring, Ron."

Ron leaned forward closer to his food. "Yeah, well, I just don't want you missing any more Quidditch games. You know, if you'd stuck with me, this wouldn't have happened! I was right in a compartment with our new Defense teacher! He was up and at those things they moment we saw them!"

Harry tried to shrug, "Yeah, sorry about that. I did try to save you a space in our compartment, it just filled up faster than I'd expected, and the last few people didn't ask permission, they just came in."

"Oh, that's alright," Ron shoved a handful of bacon into his mouth, then spoke through it, "You just keep beating Slytherin, and we'll call it even."

"Deal," Harry said with a smile.

"Ah, Mister Potter. Glad to see you with us." Professor McGonagall came up to their table, and handed out a slip of paper. "Here is your class schedule."

Harry accepted it to look over, then frowned. "Professor, I don't see many of the classes I requested."

"Yes, well, Mister Potter, I'm afraid your request came too late..." their Head of House started.

"No. It didn't," Harry interrupted. "According to Hogwarts founding charter, I have two weeks into the term to decide whether or not to change classes. I first gave you notice weeks ago in the summer, then again a couple of days ago." He handed back the list. "Please return with my correct schedule."

His friends were both staring at him, shocked to find him so assertive.

Minerva shifted uncomfortably. "Yes. Well, Mister Potter, I'm afraid the Headmaster declined to grant your appeal..."

"The Headmaster hasn't got any authority to do anything of the kind," he shot back. "No appeal was necessary, because the request for change was made in an orderly and appropriate manner, which neither he nor you could dismiss without just cause. Since you have named no cause, none exists. So, if you could correct my schedule, please? Until then, I'll use Hermione's."

Several listening Gryffindors had their jaws drop open on hearing this, as it was so totally unlike him to act in so bold a manner concerning school rules.

McGonagall was plainly uncomfortable, knowing the child was correct, but also that Albus had directed otherwise. "I shall let you speak to the Headmaster about this."

She nodded, and was about to sweep off, before Harry interrupted, "After lunch would be a good time for me, but if he wants to wait, I'll just go about with Hermione."

Hermione herself shifted a bit uncomfortably at this, and McGonagall went back with some haste to the staff table, to whisper in the Headmaster's ear.

"Blimey, Harry! What's all that about?" Ron asked around a mouthful of eggs.

Harry just shrugged. "I don't want to take Divination, as I'd rather take the same courses my mom did before I was born. They sound more useful, and I'm no longer interested in easy grades."

Ron started shaking his head. "You're giving up an easy O, you know that?"

Trying not to wince as Ron sprayed crumbs as he talked, Harry shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me. I want to take more challenging courses. I'm rather like Hermione in that."

The witch beamed.

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The sun had set by the time Harry was summoned.

"Ah, Harry. Come in! Lemon drop?" the Headmaster offered.

"No, thank you." Harry entered the office, sweeping right past the seats to hold two scrolls up before the Headmaster. "Look, I'm tired of you just stringing me along, offering meaningless placebos that accomplish nothing, so I'll get right to it. I know you don't intend to change my courses. What I don't know is why. But I don't care about that now. What I want you to know is that before I leave this office, one of these two scrolls is going into effect. This one," he laid the parchment before the Headmaster, where it rolled open, "Grants me the classes I'd requested, and this one," he unrolled the other, but held it in the air, outside of Dumbledore's reach, "transfers me to Beauxbatons, where I've already arranged to have the classes of my choice. I already have Headmistress Maxine's signature on this one, having gotten it after lunch while you delayed meeting with me. To be legal, all I have to do is sign it. Which will it be?"

Dumbledore's face appeared sad and grave. "May I ask what prompted this lack of trust, Harry?"

Harry almost snorted. That was a counterattack, an aggrieved 'Oh, you don't trust me, after all I've done for you?! How COULD you be so ungrateful?' But he could play counterattack himself now.

"Only two full years of abuse of that trust, Headmaster. You've never once acted to protect me in any meaningful way. The home you arranged for me is a hell on earth, and to make certain that I'd never lived a day without fear, you made sure you kept your own pet Death Eater at school to keep up my daily portion of abuse." Harry stated in a level voice, before leaning forward to place his second scroll on the desk and produce a quill. "In fact, in light of that, I think I'll just sign this right now."

"That won't be necessary, Harry!" Dumbledore held up a placating hand. He brought the course change scroll closer to him and produced his own quill to sign it. "I will be most happy to agree to your change of courses, provided you stay within our school."

Harry successfully fought off a smirk. He KNEW that wasn't what the old coot was prepared to do when Harry was admitted to his office!

"No, I'm really convinced I'd be happier elsewhere," Harry answered, dipping his own quill in ink. "Someplace where I don't have the man who targeted my parents for Voldemort making sure I live in hell whenever you haven't locked me up in Dursley Prison. Someplace where the House Cup isn't meaningless because one corrupt teacher steals it by bloating his own House points year after year. Maybe even someplace where I can go a year without someone trying their best to kill me. You started early this year, Headmaster. I wasn't expecting the typical murder attempt until end of term, not the start of it."

Dumbledore's face had gone exceptionally grave indeed. "What is it you want, Harry?"

"Are you really that BLIND?" Harry asked in disbelief. "How about not killing me, for a change? Let's cut back on the torture, how about that? Snape is the single worst teacher in the history of this school! I

know! I checked! He has fewer graduates who make worse grades overall, and his unprofessional behavior is unprecedented in the history of magical education! Keeping him on staff makes Hogwarts a joke! You'd get better results and less cruelty if you had Grindelwald teaching in there!"

Harry voice had risen as he'd listed these complaints, but before he stopped he pointed the quill end toward Dumbledore in an expression of seriousness. "And if you say ANYTHING to the effect of, 'I cannot just dismiss him' I am signing this scroll in that instant! I KNOW you can do better than that!"

Dumbledore sighed, leaned back, and folded his hands. "What would appease you, Harry?"

The boy stood tall. "Withdraw your protection from Severus Snape. I want dementors sucking out his soul for all he's done. Nothing less would satisfy me. He helped kill my parents and needlessly tortured me. He must pay, and you are the only person keeping him from doing that."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid I cannot offer that, Harry."

Nodding, the boy raised his inked quill to sign the transfer scroll without further comment, only to be interrupted.

"But perhaps I can offer a compromise by withdrawing him from his post at Hogwarts, and provide him employment elsewhere." Dumbledore ventured.

"That removes a negative. It fails to provide a positive," Harry spoke without raising his head from the parchment where his quill stood poised.

"If extra courses are what you seek, perhaps I can offer you a similar setup to Miss Granger?" Dumbledore reached into his desk and produced a Time Turner, a delicate hourglass on a thin chain. "This device would enable you to attend more classes than time would otherwise allow, by providing a means of turning back time. One turn

equals one hour. I'm sure Miss Granger would be happy to fill you in on the details. Is that agreeable?"

Harry thought about it for a moment, before nodding, standing up to accept the Time Turner, tucking it, and the transfer scroll, into one of his pouches.

"Perhaps I can take care of canceling that scroll for you?" Dumbledore held out a hand hopefully.

"No." Harry shook his head. "It's good until next year, and I'd really rather keep my options open in case you decide you'd really rather not live up to your end of our deal, or in case you pull some other stunt that demands a change. So I'll just hold onto it."

Dumbledore's face, which had been hopeful, fell.

His expression collapsed further when Harry stood, and saying, "Oh, and I was the one to recover this, not you," took the sword of Gryffindor, and left the office.

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Author's Notes:

I've got a confession to make. I saw some of those "Harry absorbs the part of Voldemort's soul that's been embedded in him" storylines, and was a bit shocked that someone else had the same idea, so thought I'd better hurry and get out mine.

The train of thought described in the last author's note did not start with what would happen if Harry was in a different compartment than Professor Lupin. No, it was, "What could shake Voldemort's soul fragment loose from whatever position it's in, so it can fight with, and ultimately lose to, Harry's?" The answer to that was a dementor, as they suck out souls by preference and he'd already had a close encounter with one. So next to be asked was, "What kind of delay could get that dementor that tried to kiss him on the train much closer? Enough to break the horcrux bonds?" And the answer to that was not being in the same compartment as Lupin!

But I can hardly let myself get away with large changes without adding extra details. So I threw Luna and Colin in to get that article in the paper the next day - a reporter and a photographer on site, so not only does Draco not have a fun story to tease Harry with, the entire wizarding world got upset at the frigging INSANE plan to protect Harry with something that tried to kill him!

Oh, and Luna is being a touch more serious because near death tends to make her so. She will go back to her Loony self shortly.

Of course, the real fun lies in the "Harry with a backbone" storyline.

Special thanks to Skysaber for letting me borrow one of his ideas: Language Lozenges, from his story "My Gilded Life." Sorry about not mentioning that in the last chapter.

Yes, I know Colin's brother wasn't a student until fourth year, but I needed him for that scene, and it doesn't seem important enough to change.

Chapter Three

by Lionheart

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Every so often the entire Harry Potter universe offends me so deeply that I just have to react by folding, spindling and mutilating it.

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So many Ministry personnel had been running around Hogwarts the previous day, questioning people and generally getting in the way, that the first day of classes had been postponed.

Really, the near-death of one of the most famous people in the wizarding world, and clearly their most famous current student, had caused no small amount of an uproar. The staff themselves had been in no condition to teach, much less the poor students try to learn.

The emergency, and getting rid of the dementors that had caused that emergency, while protecting everyone from a repeat of that event until the deadly dangerous creatures were gone, had consumed most of that day, until it was just too late to start their morning classes on it.

Of course, the celebration of Harry waking up at lunchtime had pretty much killed any thoughts of trying to start the day with their afternoon schedules.

Harry, himself, was trying hard to come to grips with Voldemort's memories, so it had been useful to have a whole afternoon and evening to do so. In some ways they felt exactly like his own. He could recall the life of the Dark Lord as if it had been he who'd lived it, and yet... there was no feeling attached to any of those memories.

Harry knew the halls of Hogwarts better than he had ever expected to. The five years of research Tom Riddle had done finding the Chamber of Secrets had led him all across the castle, seeking out tiny silver snakes embedded in out of the way places, so one had to break virtually all rules of the castle to find them all.

That was deliberate, as Salazar Slytherin prized rule breaking as a talent, and his little game of hunt and seek was designed to test for it.

But it left Harry knowing more about the school than he'd ever imagined, including secret passages into all four common rooms, ways of tricking out the passwords to even more secure areas, the presence of a place called the Room of Requirement, and dozens of forgotten storerooms and corners scattered here or there.

However, Harry's newfound knowledge extended over far more than just the school. Tom Riddle had traveled all over Europe seeking for hints of dark magic and secrets that he could acquire. Surprisingly, he'd not bothered much with any other continents, as Europe's ancient and wicked underbelly had more than enough to satisfy him. But Harry knew of lost castles, dead and buried cities turned into catacombs, vampire covens, werewolf colonies and more; enough to really freak him out, to be honest.

Although, he really had no intention of freaking out. The old Harry would have done so, but the old him never could have survived, much less won, a soul-to-soul death match against the horcrux inside of him. Harry had been helped to do so, but he'd also been forced to overcome most of his own flaws in order to be strong enough to win that fight.

Those weaknesses were destroying him, so those weaknesses had to go, and the magical assistance he'd received had enabled the healing of them, which at last had been enough to win that little fight.

Otherwise he would've been another Voldemort standing there, wearing Harry's body like a set of clothes. And that was a chilling thought, as Harry now knew that had nearly been what happened to Ginny in the Chamber. One Voldemort was bad enough, but one soul guiding two bodies, or three?

No, that thought was just too terrifying to contemplate.

Of course, there was so much else to contemplate in there that it was easy to focus in on something else. Harry had, so far as he knew, all of the dark idiot's memories up to the very moment Voldemort had

bounced a killing curse off of baby Harry's forehead. That meant that Harry'd also seen his parents. Of course, this was from Voldemort's perspective, and he was dueling them at the time, which was not so pleasant a memory to have, but if he could ignore that aspect of it, Harry could now recall seeing his parents alive on no less than four separate occasions - thrice while they defied him and escaped, and once when he'd ambushed them and they'd lost.

It was a bit odd of a memory to cherish, seeing as how they'd been flinging spells at one another on each of these occasions. But Harry knew it wasn't really him fighting his parents, merely the point of view of the window he was looking out of, so he could cheer each success on his parents' part, even though their attacks seemed directed at him.

Actually, thinking about that night brought several important facts to mind. One was that Sirius Black was no Death Eater. If he was, Voldemort would've known it! And secondly, it had been Snape who had brought the Dark Lord the information on that prophecy that led to the attack on his parents (and the bastard had even had the GALL to ask for Lily to be preserved and bound to him as a sex slave for his reward!). Third, it had been Peter Pettigrew who had betrayed Harry's parents, giving away the secret he'd kept for them.

Truthfully, Harry now knew more about the events leading up to that night than any other person living. He also knew of Tom Riddle's precautions that kept him from dying fully. So he knew that his enemy was still out there somewhere, trying to return. What facts he hadn't known from Voldemort's memories could be filled in by Harry's own observances on his first and second year encounters with remnants of the villain.

Ack! So much to do!

Harry's first act on leaving the Headmaster's office had been to turn back the Time Turner twelve hours, to that morning, slip on his father's invisibility cloak, and go down to the Chamber of Secrets, thanking that bumbling over-eager dealer at the Safari Shop that had loaded him down with the equipment to render large animals down into their component parts.

Necessary for trophy hunting, but also for collecting rare ingredients, of which just about every part of a basilisk was one. Pity the eyes had been destroyed, as they were a focus of so much of the creature's magic they were immensely valuable, and could be put to a number of rare uses.

However, the creature's flesh was so poisonous that it had not decayed much in only two short months. A lack of scavengers down there helped a great deal in preserving the corpse, of course. So Harry had busied himself with rendering that giant serpent for magical parts while he'd thought over his situation and what to do about it.

The work had kept him calm and given him opportunity to ponder, just like working in Aunt Petunia's garden had once given him time to think. There was really so much Harry had to do it was stifling, and worse, the Headmaster had him under effectual house arrest, whether at school or at home. There were things he'd have to do, if he were going to defeat Voldemort, that just couldn't happen while he was trapped at Hogwarts.

Also, he got the strong impression he did not have very much time.

A day of thought had helped him settle out his priorities, however. And a good night's rest had helped also. There was still a great deal he could do while trapped at Hogwarts. The amount of things he wanted and needed to do were falling all over each other in a cascading flurry, everything wanting to be dealt with first. So he guessed that it didn't matter that he couldn't get to the outside stuff just yet, as he had more than enough on his plate at the moment of immediate needs to be seen to now.

Speaking of plates, he got up early and hurried down to breakfast so he didn't have to watch Ron's table manners.

When Ron did come down he was fuming, and plopped himself down to an angry seat beside Harry. "Your cat tried to eat my rat, I'll have you know."

'Ah! An opportunity! I was wondering when I'd get to bring that up,' Harry thought, before reaching into his belt pouch and producing four coins left over from his spending spree at the Alley that summer. "I'll tell you what, Ron. I'd rather not argue all year over this, so why don't you sell Scabbers to me? I'll pay you four galleons for him, and his cage."

Ron's jaw dropped. His anger evaporated, and he was off like a shot toward the common room to get his rat and make the trade before Harry wised up and changed his mind.

"Hello, Hermione, how are you?" Harry asked his best female friend as she appeared. Her answer was to go right to up him and give him a hug, which he surprised her by returning, holding it for long moments that reassured them both and left them feeling very happy.

"I'm a bit eager to get to classes, actually," Hermione brushed hair out of her face with a negligent gesture as she sat down beside him.

"Me too," he smiled, then leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "Dumbledore gave me the same schedule as you."

The girl fidgeted. "Harry... how could he? I mean... oh!" Her eyes widened as he let her catch a glimpse of the chain he had around his neck. Then she broke into a big grin and gave another hug. "Oh! We're going to have so much fun together! Do you have the books on Muggle Studies?"

"No, in fact I don't," Harry began, only to get interrupted by Ron returning with Scabbers in a rat cage.

"You aren't going to welsh, are you?" Ron put the cage before Harry, with a look of concern, sure that his friend had wised up while he wasn't there to watch him.

"No, here you are. Four galleons, and now I own Scabbers the rat," Harry put the coins in his best male friend's hand.

"Harry, you know you can only bring one pet to Hogwarts, don't you?" Hermione looked askance at this exchange.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "But I really wasn't planning to keep Scabbers at Hogwarts. Excuse me for a moment."

Harry picked up the rat's cage and left the Great Hall, only to return in a moment without it, and he was smiling as he resumed his place at breakfast.

"What did you do with Scabbers?" Ron asked.

Harry enjoyed his shrug. "Oh, I sent him someplace where I could keep him without breaking the 'one pet per wizard' rule at Hogwarts. That's all."

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When Harry left the Great Hall with Scabbers, he passed himself on his way back in and gave his other self a jaunty wave. The other him went back in to sit with his friends and finish having breakfast, while the present Harry went to catch a floo ride, when he caught sight of McGonagall out of the corner of his eye, and sensing in her an opportune moment, rushed over to intercept the Professor before she made it to the Great Hall for her own breakfast.

She caught his approach out of the side of her eye and turned to meet him. "Ah, Mister Potter, was there something you wanted? If so, could it be discussed while I'm having breakfast? I wouldn't want to miss it, and my day is rather full."

Harry hurriedly shook his head. "No, Professor McGonagall. I couldn't think of food at the same time as this. Ron started a fight about how his rat and my cat didn't get along, so I bought his rat to stop fights from forming. Now, I know about a 'one pet per wizard' rule, and frankly I care for my cat a great deal more than anyone ever could for Scabbers. He's useless and lazy. So, I was wondering if you knew of a charm that could put him down painlessly?"

McGonagall looked at him with pinched lips. "You know, you could simply send the animal home to your relatives to keep for you."

"Accounting, Professor McGonagall. Cost for benefit." Harry corrected in a prim tone of his own, rather closely resembling Hermione. "Scabbers offers no powers, useful abilities or playful enjoyment, in fact he's so lazy he rarely wakes up. I have no affection towards him, and rats pee over every surface they cross - it's how they navigate, by smelling for their own urine trails. Frankly, it's gross. He's not worth the cost to feed and care for. But it was worth the galleons to save my friendship with Ron."

"Then I suggest you give the animal away, or let it go free," McGonagall primly declared in tones of disapproval, before turning her back and walking off, having nonverbally declared the conversation over.

Harry had a moment when he could see himself pressing the issue. In fact the appropriate words sprang to mind. He could just say, 'Oh, well I guess I'll try this, then, Diffindo!' and cast a Cutting Curse, carefully aiming it between the cage bars.

But he could already see where that would go.

Scabbers would explode into energy, trying to evade the curse (Peter was already terrified, having listened to Harry's conversation with McGonagall). So he might have to cast it several times, shaking the cage as he did so to tumble Scabbers back into the spell's path.

Professor McGonagall would turn around in shock at the sound of the spell, mouth open to deliver a sharp reprimand, and perhaps take House points. If his first spell missed she'd take the rat away, deliver several sharp and stinging reprimands, along with the punishments of House points and a detention or two, and then she would let Scabbers go free out in the forest somewhere, leaving Peter free to go his own way and get up to trouble.

Not acceptable.

On the other hand, supposing he hit, the cage would burst open to reveal Peter Pettigrew, thought dead, who would be trying to staunch the flow of blood out of his stomach, or someplace.

Even if Harry stunned the man to stop him from telling a string of lies to cast his surprising survival in a good light, McGonagall would see him as an old friend returned, squash any of Harry's objections (like she had many times before), and see to it that Peter went to the Hospital Wing, where he'd be put under the best of care by Poppy. And either he would be treated as a hero and welcomed back into the land of the living, or he'd escape to continue hiding out, or going about whatever foul misdeeds he wanted.

Whatever Harry tried would not be listened to, because he was a kid, and none of them had ever listened to him before. So he elected not to go down that path. Instead, he shot McGonagall a shy and disarming grin. "I'm sorry. No one ever taught me how to deal with pets."

He was about to go on, but the professor interrupted him, "You said you had a cat this year? What happened to Hedwig?" she asked in a concerned voice.

Harry gave her the look of a child eager to explain its good idea. "Oh! She is staying with Hermione's parents this year! I figure, I only use her for sending mail during the summer, and if I need to do so at school I can always use a school owl. But, this way they can send their daughter packages and letters without waiting for her to send them something first! Hermione can always use school owls to send mail to her parents, but until now they couldn't start a contact if she got busy with schoolwork or forgot, or whatever. Now they can surprise her, if they want to."

The Transfiguration teacher softened slightly at this explanation.

Harry gave a bright and deliberately charming little shrug, hefting Scabbers in his cage. "Anyway, I'd better go off and get this thing registered, and its powers examined, so that way whoever gets it will know what it can do. With your permission, Professor?"

The professor considered it a moment before sharply nodding, leading him at a brisk pace back to her office. As they did so, Harry muttered, just low enough for her to hear, but as if talking to himself, "Although why anyone would want... I mean, rats pee over

EVERYTHING! Even your hands if you pick them up! Which, if you think about it, Ron was handling him all of the time, and NEVER washed his hands before eating, and didn't use utensils much, just grabbing things to put on his plate or into his mouth..."

The professor turned slightly green, but pretended not to hear.

McGonagall led him to her office and opened up the floo, sending him off with a sharp, "Make sure you are back in time for your classes, Mister Potter!"

He nodded and disappeared into the fire, with a sharp call of, "Ministry of Magic!" as his destination.

'That was rather well played,' Harry congratulated himself on a performance having accomplished his goals more than adequately as he spun through the magical transport system. By igniting McGonagall's fears of him destroying it, she was inclined to speed any alternate option. Giving the animal away was her own suggestion, but registering a beast so it could be certified harmless and not some concealed menace was a standard measure - and one that the Weasleys could never have afforded to take on an ordinary rat Percy had just found out in their garden.

So, rather than having had to sneak out of Hogwarts, McGonagall had sent him on his way herself, following a course of action she herself suggested - preparing papers for the rat so it could get another owner.

Arriving at the Ministry, Harry quickly ducked behind a potted plant and discretely spun himself back two hours, then used the intervening hours to start a number of legal procedures.

The whole Ministry was still in an uproar, which he shamefully used to its full advantage. They'd 'done him wrong' and were eager to be seen making things right, so he got special attention to all of his grievances.

Sadly, there was no official record of Albus Dumbledore having placed him anywhere. Apparently people just believed the old coot

when he'd promised them things like, 'Harry Potter was placed with his relatives, where he'll be safe.' Note that statement - there was no actual indication that Albus had done the placing, only that he knew that Harry had been placed. He could, at need, haul in some disposable underling to blame for the 'lapse in judgment' or some such for having effectively enslaved the Boy-Who-Lived to bitter enemies of his family, who hated everything magic with a burning passion.

And, actually, he'd probably already set up Hagrid to suffer that fall for him, if such did get divulged and a scapegoat became necessary. After all, it had been the Groundskeeper who had done the leg work of taking Harry from the ruins of his parents' home and delivering him to the doorstep of the Dursleys - it would be simplicity itself for the Headmaster to disclaim any knowledge about how horrid the conditions there were.

Albus simply hadn't been informed, that's all. Surely, if he'd known how bad it would have been for young Harry, he would've stepped in. But, sadly, Hagrid had never told him any specifics that could have revealed such danger!

It was all the Groundskeeper's fault. Harry could already imagine the tears of perfectly faked remorse Dumbledore would summon as he planted all of the blame for any reported mistreatment squarely on Hagrid, for not having done any due diligence at all in investigating those wicked muggles.

I told you to do that? Why, Hagrid? How could you have misunderstood me so badly? What I'd said was...

No, the Headmaster's dodge was already in place. Of that, Harry was certain. He'd never be caught under the falling anvil of responsibility should reports surface about the nightmare of Harry's upbringing, enslaved to his enemies who'd personally hated him and everything he stood for.

Nevertheless, Harry made precisely that report - because that was what the Dursleys were, bitter enemies of his family, who hated

everything magic with a burning passion. And he had been their slave for ten full years.

He also made sure to make a good sob story out of it.

A normal child would feel guilt and shame, and conceal at least some aspects of the truth in order to gloss over the worst of it, fearing as though they themselves were to blame for their treatment. Harry had no such inclination. He wanted the Dursleys to suffer. He wanted them stripped of their power over him, so he never had to put up with them ever again.

He made sure to have an auto-notes quill going under his chair when he was giving his testimony before the Aurors and Underage Magic office, where he was making a case for his emancipation because of "the barbarous cruelty of those torturous creatures who'd abused him so horribly."

Sadly, Harry couldn't tie the Headmaster to that publicly. There was just no proof. However, there would be a few who knew the truth, and would be able to connect the dots. If any of them chose to come forward, well, gravy. He did not either expect or require that, it would just be nice.

In the end, after a full examination by a team of St. Mungo's Healers and Mediwitches, who confirmed his report of massive, long term abuse, neglect, overwork and near-starvation, Harry was free to go take advantage of his next opportunity while the Ministry caught fire in righteous indignation over this newest scandal, launching off onto their next crusade on behalf of their precious Boy-Who-Lived.

Fame was a weapon, something that Dumbledore understood all too well. And certainly a part of his having kept Harry locked up and isolated was to ensure that the boy never learned how to use his own reputation.

Well, too late for that. Tom had been an expert on fame before he'd chosen fear. He'd built himself up from a know-nothing nobody without a respectable old family name to the leader of House Slytherin whose peers willingly swore allegiance to him and his cause.

Selfish pureblood bigots fought for him and died for him, seeing his ambitions as their own.

That takes no small amount of skill, and Harry had inherited that. It was time to put it to good use.

Actually, Harry had a number of things to be pursuing at the Ministry that morning, and the very least of such would be to destroy one of Voldemort's servants, and in the same motion helping to free a possible ally of his own.

Peter Pettigrew's destruction was not actually high on Harry's list of things he had to attend to. There were too many things he counted as emergencies for that. No, Death Eaters were strictly 'targets of opportunity' as far as he was concerned. It was just that Peter had fallen practically into his lap.

And, of course, there was also the issue of Sirius Black. Voldemort knew the man was not a Death Eater, his secret right hand man, or any of the things that poor escaped prisoner had been accused of. And, since Voldemort knew it as of the time of his death, Harry also knew it.

So, there was an innocent man out there, close friend to his parents, a good if not spectacular dueler (the only Marauder other than James to have stood up to fight Voldemort personally and lived to tell of it), who was being hunted like a mad dog, and who just happened to also be Harry's godfather.

Well, call him naive, but it seemed to Harry that a blitz attack was going to be the only way to slip anything by Dumbledore in the Ministry. Riddle'd cared little for details of all of the internal politicking going on there. During his first rise, it had been Lucius' playground, and Voldemort had been content to give orders and demand results.

It wasn't like he could pursue his own aims there in person, after all.

However, even though his perspective was second hand, Tom knew that Albus had been a shrewd player on that battlefield. One would think the old man's power base was at Hogwarts, but during political

struggles at the Ministry of Magic it was clear that canny old codger never lost a battle there he did not intend to lose.

And the few power struggles at the Ministry Dumbledore did choose to lose he'd always try to arrange in such a way so that shortly afterward, everyone could see what 'fools' they'd been for not having trusted him all along! Thus increasing his influence and power, as rather than being seen as a sinister tyrant who always got his way, he was viewed as a noble voice of reason that people ignored at their peril - because he was always proven right in the end.

No, Dumbledore didn't have to be the Minister of Magic. He already wielded all of the power there through his colossal reputation.

Harry wanted his freedom. But he suspected that Albus would fight him so hard on that issue that Voldemort might have an easier time getting his body back than Harry would of getting emancipated. So, having thought through that, he'd already resolved to put more than one iron into the fire.

Whoever this Sirius Black person really was, he almost had to be better than the Dursleys. And, if he wasn't, his record was shady enough so that Harry could get himself withdrawn from his custody in an instant, if that was called for. So, it was a very small risk to him to set whatever wheels had to be put in motion for him to be cleared of all charges, and granted custody of Harry.

He would prefer emancipation, but would take a different guardian if that was all he could get. And blocking both of those, when there was currently a surge of 'Help our poor Harry' feelings running high all around, ought to at least tax the old man's abilities.

Hopefully, the old man couldn't block everything forever.

Harry would prefer to set on a third course for freedom, but that would have to wait. He had a complete set of secondary options, but none more that could be pursued while these present plots were brewing.

There was a young lady, just out of Hogwarts, at the pet registry center of the Ministry. Oh, it had a funky, self important name, the

Registry of Magical Creatures Sub-Department, a smaller attachment to the Department for the Disposal of Dangerous Magical Creatures (where, according to memories acquired from Tom, there was still a loyal Death Eater working). But, in order to sell a creature as a magical pet, you had to pass it through here.

Peter was frantic at being there, understandably so. Still, it did him no good whatsoever to scamper around his cage, since Harry had been wise enough to put some very strong locking charms not only on the door, but also the major joints, so it couldn't even come apart under the rat's thrashing.

Peter's efforts just annoyed the young lady, who had to cast her stunner several times in order to hit the frantically evading rat. And, by the time she'd succeeded, the pretty young witch was greatly annoyed at the critter.

Then she started her regime of diagnostic spells, meant to certify a critter as harmless.

Peter was anything but.

A dark magic detection spell came up a faint positive. This was apparently rare enough to raise a daintily plucked eyebrow on the girl, although Harry imagined that she shouldn't be too surprised. Those who kept the really dark pets never made the mistake of trying to register them as harmless. But the boy also made note of the spell, as it just might have been reacting to Peter's Dark Mark, and a spell for revealing those would be terribly useful if Tom should come back and start getting some new recruits.

Harry already knew what Tom knew about his old ones, of course.

Naturally a positive, even a faint one, on such a fundamental part of the pet certification process demanded additional scans, and deeper ones, and once again Harry made careful note of the spells the young witch was using, as he could imagine far more uses for them than just certifying pets.

One of the great weaknesses of the magical world was that, unlike muggles, they did not have enough common sense to apply good solutions to several problems. A muggle with a cigarette lighter could and would start any sort of fires, whereas a wizard with a cigarette lighting spell would light cigarettes. And only rarely was that strictly a limitation built into the spell itself.

Apparently, Peter had been a naughty person, because he came up badly on enough of those spells to clearly alarm the young woman, enough so that she called in Auror support - an interested party from the Department for the Disposal of Dangerous Magical Creatures was already on hand by then, having been only just next door.

Then it came time for the big event Harry had been waiting for, the animagus revealing spell, and one part Peter had panicked over, because he knew it would expose him (and one very good reason why he couldn't truly expect to have hidden out with a family more wealthy than the Weasleys, as there were too many dangerous magical critters out there NOT to pay the seven sickles for the extra bit of security registering your pets offered most people).

Pet shop animals came already certified. But the 'Oh, I just found this on the lawn, can I keep it?' sort of pets did not. But there were enough flesh-eating slugs and other things out there not to trust most of the latter sort, thus the whole registration process in the first place.

As expected, once the revealer spell hit Peter, he became Peter again, and no longer Scabbers the Rat.

To the surprise of the young lady, the disposal expert, and the Auror (but not to Harry) Peter had already overcome the stunner and made a mad dash for freedom the very instant his increased size broke him out of the cage.

Harry brought him down with another well-placed stunner, right in the back. What he'd wanted to do was launch a pair of blasting curses to blow out the rat man's legs out from under him, so he could never run away under any circumstances, ever again.

But a bloodthirsty image would not suit the Golden Boy of Gryffindor.

"Wha... what did you do that for?" the witch sputtered dumbly.

Harry shot her a sharp look. "This is a suspicious character! Don't you think it a bit odd that Scabbers the Rat was a MAN?! Why would anyone choose to hide out for twelve years as a FAMILY PET? Huh!?" While the Auror and other 'responsible adults' stared in mute shock, Harry bent low and searched the stunned Pettigrew's clothes, surreptitiously palming both wands he found on him, noting in pleasure that one of those was Voldemort's. Then he lifted the man's left arm up to show off the dark mark to the trio. "Would you look at that? This man is a Death Eater."

"Pettigrew?" the Auror's voice strangled out, even as she'd come closer to examine him herself, and confirm indeed that it was he.

Peter chose that moment to surge up once more (Harry's stunner had been deliberately weak) and dash away again. This time a pair of blasting curses did take out his knees from beneath him, blowing off both legs near the hip.

After all, a stunner hadn't worked, and from the way Harry had positioned himself, between and slightly behind the adults, the Auror would think the disposal agent had done it, and the disposal agent think the Auror did. A minor Confundus on each, and both would even believe they'd thrown one of the pair of spells, intending to stop the man by aiming for the floor ahead of the suspicious character.

Now Harry permitted himself a small, and wholly internal, grin of satisfaction. Workers at the Ministry were idiots, the lot of them. It was inevitable that someone among this circus of fools would have permitted the animagus to escape in one unguarded moment.

But even a rat had to have legs with which to flee on.

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Author's Notes:

You've read it before. It happens in every story. Peter gets captured, only to get away again almost immediately, almost invariably before giving useful testimony that might free Sirius Black.

Well, not this time, or at any rate, not any of the usual ways at least. If I do choose to recycle him for use in future events, it will be done differently than any of you have seen before, I'm certain.

Chapter Four

by Lionheart

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Hermione was stuck in a quandary, puzzling over a problem that lay in entirely new territory for her.

She was wondering if a boy liked her. Specifically, she was wondering if Harry liked her.

The girl had to admit that she'd had something of a schoolgirl crush on him ever since reading about him in so many of her books. But the boy she'd met on the Hogwarts train had not lived up to any of her expectations, so it had been easy to suppress those feelings. She'd cast them aside completely by the time Halloween rolled around and Ron said those horrible things to her.

That had landed her alone in a bathroom when a troll came rampaging through the castle.

Hermione had looked up the laws and customs involving Life Debts, and she owed one to Harry for having saved her then. Ron came to her assistance only because Harry dragged him, and Ron was the one who'd caused her to be in danger in the first place. You couldn't endanger someone's life and then save it from a situation you'd created and earn a Life Debt. That would be silly, and lead to all sorts of problems.

Of course, there was very little that wasn't silly in the wizarding world, but that one, at least, seemed to be based on rules of magic, and those made sense, most of them. You couldn't cause a problem, and solve it, then expect a reward - the causing and the solving equaled out. If anything, there would be lingering blame from the causing, as the upset and turmoil that created before it got solved left a lingering minus credit.

Harry, on the other hand, never did or said anything to hurt her feelings, that day, or indeed any other. The kind boy was oblivious as anything, clueless and shy to a fault. It made her feel brave and

outgoing just being around him, by contrast, which was an odd feeling, actually.

All of which kept distracting her from her point, although the sight of him riding that troll like it was a bull at a rodeo had done wonders for reviving that sense of wonder she'd first discovered reading about his story.

It gave her shivers still to think of it. That was the single bravest thing she'd ever seen anyone do - and he'd done it for her. She'd been so overcome with her impression of him after that she hadn't been able to stop hanging around him, and Harry had generously accepted her and made her his friend.

She didn't kid herself about Ron. She'd always had people like that around, trying to take advantage of her. All Ron wanted was for her to be his two-legged homework machine, and the legs were optional as far as he was concerned. He had no use for her other than getting around his own work, and his frequent arguments over the stupidest things underscored that.

Really, Ron had only two things he argued about. One was facts, and he was always wrong about those, so it was a wonder that he even tried to argue with her about those anymore. And the other was him just being mean, saying things that hurt her in order to 'take her down a peg' for having been right about all of her facts.

The boy was a leech, and Hermione would not have put up with his constant whining and begging for homework help (he essentially wanted her to study FOR him! Really! The whole point of this was to learn things for yourself! Did he ALWAYS expect her to be around to cast his spells for him? Honestly!) had it not been for that being a prerequisite of hanging out with Harry.

Harry was the most isolated boy she ever knew. He even had more trouble making friends than HER! And if that wasn't an odd statement to make about a celebrity, she didn't know what was. But it was as if he'd been afraid of everyone around him, all of the time, like he'd break if they'd talked to him!

And that was the second time in a row that she'd managed to distract herself from the real issue: Did Harry like her?

Until this summer she would have said: No, not possible.

Ron was lazy and wanted to be carried through life mooching on the work of others. And, until this summer, at least, Harry had been going along on that pattern to emulate his first friend. Neither had discovered the existence of girls yet, nor were they likely to soon.

But then something had changed to have broken that pattern. Harry had woken up to study and started trying hard.

Then there had been that terrifying event on the train, where she'd nearly lost him. For a time there, she'd been certain she had, that he'd be gone out of her life forever, and worry and concern made her impulsive, so she'd hugged him the first time she'd seen him up, awake and alive.

Then he'd swung her around. It'd made her feel... girly.

Hermione was almost fourteen years old. She'd been going through puberty for some time, and was nearly over it. Her figure had rounded out some, not that you could tell through Hogwarts robes, and she had discovered interest in boys, although she knew she was unattractive, so hopelessness had driven out most of her desires to explore that topic.

Harry having picked her up and swung her around had been the first moment she'd truly felt like a young lady who might be desirable to boys, rather than a genderless thing who hung out with boys.

It had been an addictive feeling. Wanting to feel more of it, she'd hugged him again the next day... and Harry had returned it.

Now all of the confusion, wondering about the topic of the male gender, that she had skipped over by dismissing those thoughts and urges came back with a vengeance. And she had to talk about it, thinking it over wasn't doing her any good at all. She just kept going around in circles.

Hermione sighed, figuring it was time she bite the bullet and go swallow her pride to join in those 'giggling in a corner' conversations Lavender, Parvati and their friends were having, discussing makeup tips and so on, obsessing about boys. She'd resolutely avoided them until now, but... sigh.

She'd been a bookworm for a very long time now. It had always been a safe refuge where no one could challenge her. Now... now it looked like it was time to try being a girl.

She hoped Harry appreciated this, even though deep down she was certain he wouldn't. Boys didn't develop those sort of feelings until later than girls, and both boys in her life were substantially younger than her. She felt certain girls were still 'icky' to both Harry and Ron. She knew she was going to be disappointed.

But, at the same time, something in her was desperate to try.

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Harry arrived back at Hogwarts in plenty of time and joined his two friends for breakfast, pausing to take a pair of potions with his meal.

One generous aspect of having reported his abuse to official mediwitches at St. Mungo's was that they had immediately prescribed potions to correct the damage from the massive, long term maltreatment and abuse.

Nothing could have made Harry happier.

The Dursleys had worked him hard and fed him next to nothing. If he'd eaten well all that time, he'd have been a solid mass of muscle under those too-large clothes, but that would've been a threat to Dudley. So, instead, they'd starved him, and now Harry looked like a survivor out of a Nazi death camp. Except the potions were supposed to fix that right up, and he might just get all of that muscle he'd earned out of all of that heavy labor.

Harry could hardly wait, and to make the whole thing better, his bones ought to be less fragile, he ought to have more energy, and they'd even given him ointments to treat all of the scars on his body from Vernon and Petunia's beatings, Harry Hunting 'games' he'd lost, and bites from Aunt Marge's dogs.

His eyes might even get better, correcting the damage of constant abuse, dim light and starvation had done to stunt their proper development. That was something he was eagerly looking forward to, as glasses were a handicap he didn't need at all in that which was to come.

Where now he was the least physically fit and able student of his year, with all that damage corrected, and the muscles he'd earned filling out, he ought to be far and away the best.

The best was always a good thing to be. In particular, in this case where he was going to try impressing people, and that was hard to do as a scrawny, underfed, puny and broken thing.

A scrawny, underfed, puny and broken thing that Dumbledore had carefully arranged for him to become, directing his entire childhood toward that end.

No, Harry considered Voldemort less of a threat to him than Dumbledore. All Voldemort had been going to do was kill him, quickly, cleanly and painlessly. You didn't suffer under a killing curse, it just killed, an instant death.

Dumbledore hadn't been merciful enough to kill him. No, he was an expert on how to make a body suffer worse than death. He'd arranged for Harry to be tortured and brutalized, his mind and ego crushed under constant inhuman treatments that ought to have made hardened criminals blush in shame.

Of those two, Dumbledore was clearly the worst offender, and he was the one who was presently in power. Trying to avoid him was the higher priority, as he was the more immediate, more dangerous threat.

Of course, he couldn't just come out and say it. No, that campaign would be hard fought, and the only way to do it would be one step at a time, unravel a scheme here, a plot there. To do otherwise would be to invite disaster. The Headmaster had no effective limits to his own actions. He wielded too much power in too many places to be confronted directly. Albus would have to be sidestepped, for now, and that was going to be difficult, if possible at all.

Having eaten breakfast, where Ron was jabbering about all of the brooms and things he'd like (and he'd spent the money he gotten from selling Scabbers at least a dozen times already, from the way he talked), with Hermione sending Harry shy and calculating looks out of the corner of her eyes, the trio got up to go off to their first day of classes.

On his way out, Harry stopped by the Ravenclaw table to thank Luna for that article she'd written about what happened on the train, and presented her with the notes he'd taken of his dispositions at the Ministry, 'for a little light reading.' And he left with a wink.

Hopefully, she'd write another article out of that material. The more angles out of which he could attack Dumbledore's plots, the more likely Albus was to abandon his servants to escape the blame himself. And without the Supreme Mugwump's protections, the Dursleys were doomed from all they'd done.

Good riddance. They deserved it. They'd done everything they could to earn the worst punishments a government could give for child abusers. Death would be too good for them.

Harry got shaken out of his thoughts by them arriving at the tower for their first class of Divination.

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Divination class was not Harry's favorite, and the teacher was batty as anything. However, as she pronounced his imminent demise, he met her gaze and read her mind just to confirm she was full of it, and came across some fascinating information.

Namely, a prophecy the professor probably didn't recall at all, that named him as the one who could defeat Voldemort. More specifically, he got more of that prophecy than Snape had been able to overhear and pass on to Tom.

'Neither can die while the other survives, huh? Interesting.' Harry thought. 'Pity the guy was a madman who couldn't be trusted, otherwise he and I could come to some sort of arrangement, and both be immortal.'

They all came out of class and, while the others were milling around, a few of the girls in their year being terribly impressed with their bogus teacher, Hermione was fidgeting nervously and checking around for a place to hide.

Harry sidled up to her and took her arm. "Hey Ron. Give us a minute, I'm going to go feel up her boobs. We'll meet back with you downstairs, alright?"

The gossiping girls shushed, scandalized.

Ron's eyes grew round and he dashed off, panicked.

"Harry!" Hermione objected, shocked, blushing and outraged all at the same time.

He dragged her into a convenient broom closet and took out his Time Turner. "What? You don't want him to suspect what is actually going on, do you? We're going to be doing this all year. What more convenient excuse could you think of for always vanishing off together? This way everyone thinks they know what is going on, and won't bother to question further."

"You'll have the whole school thinking I'm a scarlet woman!" she objected, then muttered, "Actually, it's probably too late to stop that now."

He stopped and stared at her. "Very well. I'm listening. You come up with a better excuse, and we'll use that one. You can slap me in the face and rush off, all embarrassed, to tell everyone how I tried to take

advantage of you. I'll even serve detention for it. Your reputation will be saved. But first, a good excuse we can rely on to get away for private moments to turn back time."

She stared at him helplessly for several long moments.

"We're going to be late for Muggle Studies," he gently reminded, lifting his hourglass on its chain. "These things only turn back by hours, not by 'hour and ten minute' intervals."

"You're not feeling up my boobs!" she told him firmly.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he quipped, then stopped himself. "No, wait. I lied. It actually keeps me up at nights, wondering what they're like, and wanting to find out. I keep picturing you in mussy hair and a Hogwarts tie, and nothing else, teasing your mouth with a quill as you ask me if I want to do homework together. But, sadly, they don't have an anatomy course at Hogwarts. It's all independent study. Curses, another dream destroyed!"

Hermione had never blushed so much in her life! Her cheeks were crimson, and she couldn't tell if he was joking or not.

Although that did seem to resolve the question of if he'd passed out of the 'girls are icky' stage. No boy without hormones could've teased her like that!

"You don't actually think that," she told him morosely, tired of lying to herself and just wanting to face the truth.

He reached forward and kissed her firmly on the lips. After releasing her, he quipped, "Wrong. And anytime you want someone to prove your boobs are attractive, I'm your man! I promise a most thorough examination, rigorous testing, and my own personal certification drawn from my expert opinion on how wonderfully they measure in my 'wow, boobs!' category! But I can already tell your history of good grades will be kept up in this vital department."

She slapped his shoulder lightly, ashamed of him and secretly pleased at the same time. She liked it. She couldn't quite understand

all of those feelings a whirl inside of her, but she liked them all, a lot. And she secretly wanted him to keep doing things that made her feel that way.

"People are probably already saying I'm your girlfriend," she told him, testing for what his reaction would be.

He leaned forward, took hold of her arms, and kissed her again. "There. Now you are an honest woman. Actually, I think I forgot a step." He got down on his knees before her, looking up and clasping her hands in his. "Hermione, will you be my girlfriend? Or, if not, can you pretend? At least until you can think of a better excuse for always running off together, I mean? And, if you do, could you please help me plan the staging of our massive, public breakup? If you throw a few curses at me, and I dodge out of the way, we can probably get Draco Malfoy with a couple of good ones. But it's all in the timing!"

Giggling, she nodded and helped him stand back up.

Then she bit her lip, and told him, "But it's only for pretend!"

She would have liked to claim more of him, but didn't want to get hurt too badly when he eventually wised up that there were better girls than her out there that he could catch who weren't unattractive bookworms.

Rising, he gave her a hug and asked in her ear, "While we're pretending we're going out, do you mind if we pretend to snog in the common room?"

"HARRY!" she squealed, happily scandalized.

He chuckled, then quirked a grin at her. "You do realize that I'm going to have to whisper wicked things to you on occasion, so you'll be properly blushing, mussed and flustered when we leave our broom closet rendezvous together? Actually, I might have to aid to get the mussing done manually. Wouldn't want our secret not-snogging to get revealed for lack of evidence, would we?"

She gave him a glare made terribly ineffective by a lack of any real feeling behind it. A grin wormed its way onto her face a little later.

She wanted to deny the knowledge, but knew he didn't mean it. Still, it was nice to hear it, even if it was just him joking. And it was nice for him to play at flirting with her. It made her feel less frumpy and unlovable. Although she desperately wished it could be real, and couldn't quite squash all hope it was.

"Well, now we're late." Harry sighed, looking at his watch. It was a purely mechanical one that could work inside the magic fields of the castle. "C'mon, we'll spin back two hours, and spend forty minutes of it in the library."

Hermione sighed and licked her lips, a little disappointed the teasing was over, even though it had been more than she could bear at times. Finding her courage, she took a step back into old habits and scolded, "We'll just have to be late. Professor McGonagall made me promise not to use it any more than necessary, and specifically mentioned I was not to overuse the library."

Harry took his own necklace, brought her close, and looped it around both of their necks, an arm around her waist to keep her near and tight. As he spun it back the two hours, he calmly argued, "But what is necessary? Tell me, oh divine Hermione. How long is a day?"

"Twenty four hours," she answered primly, then sucked in her bottom lip. "Divine Hermione?"

"I've got to practice our act." He winked saucily at her, exactly the sort of thing that made her unsure of whether he was kidding her or not. Argh! When did Harry get so confusing?

"And how long is a typical working day?" he continued, not yet releasing her.

She tried hard to ignore that part, licking her lip again. "Eight hours. Actually nine, but that includes an hour for lunch, and doesn't account for commute or traffic. Some people have to work longer, but it's

generally agreed that's not healthy. So it can't count as average, only extreme."

"Exactly!" he gave her a little squeeze, then released her and took his chain off from around her neck (actually disappointing her a lot as they lost that close contact). "Do the math yourself. Employers ask everything they can get out of their employees without doing lasting harm. Over centuries, more has been tried and tested over and over again, but what they can get away with without 'lasting harm' has been determined to be about eight hours of work a day. That leaves two hours of taking care of yourself and sleeping for every hour of work."

He swept her out of the broom closet into the now-empty hallway, and led her by the hand down the stairs a little less than an hour before Divination was to start, chatting all the while, "More work changes those proportions, so demands more support time to compensate to avoid becoming unhealthy. Say our two extra classes only add on four extra hours of work, two sitting in the room listening to lectures, and another hour apiece doing homework. That's a fairly standard program. But to maintain a healthy paradigm, we must have not only those four hours, but another eight in addition to them: four for sleeping, and four for doing whatever, taking in an extra meal and playing around I suppose, just to stay happy, healthy human beings. Anything less does lasting harm, as has been proven by what we've already discussed."

Hermione was thinking hard, chewing on this argument he'd offered. "Yes, I suppose I can see that," she allowed, then spoke doubtfully, "But that's not going to be easy to adjust to. Our bodies have a certain rhythm of their own. Mom always calls it our Body Clock. It won't be easy going to thirty-six hour days, even if we are getting a large enough proportion of sleep."

"You know? You're absolutely right," Harry agreed. "The body has a wisdom all its own. We should listen to it. After all, they are right about most things concerning them. Well, that settles it, then. Twenty-four hour days it is!"

"But that way we'll never get to all our classes!" Hermione halted, objecting.

Harry allowed his momentum to carry him around to face her, grinning. "Ah! But you misunderstand me! I said we would be forced to take twenty-four hour days, but I meant we must take two of them for each everyone else experiences! That way our body clocks stay in alignment with what is both healthy and normal, and we are not overworked or damaged in any way."

"But even supposing we do, three of our classes are held at the same time!" Hermione shook her head, disagreeing. "Twice through each day wouldn't be enough to get them all, and three is just preposterous! Where would we eat and sleep for one thing? We can't afford to risk running into our past selves!"

"One set of meals in the kitchen, one sent up to our quarters, and one in the Great Hall with our classmates, is a complete solution as far as meals go," Harry informed her with a grin. He'd been originally shooting for two days, one of twenty five instead of twenty four hours, which was a comparatively small adjustment. But since she was the one to bring up three, who was he to disagree? "And, if I can arrange proper sleeping quarters so we only have to spend one night in our dormitory beds, things should work out. Don't you agree?"

Then he sweetened the pot, leaning closer to touch foreheads and whisper, "Just think of all of the extra side projects we could get done in all that time, and the additional reading."

Hermione blushed, flustered that he could play her buttons so easily, and amazed that he'd almost convinced her using logical, reasoned arguments. It wasn't like the old him, but he'd really changed over the summer. "They'd have to be just as secure as our dorms. I don't want to have to explain things to McGonagall if anything goes wrong, or wake up to find some Slytherin has found us and done something awful to us in our sleep!"

"Deal!" He shook her hand almost too quickly, before trotting off. "There is one place not far from here that I can show you right away. It's called the Room of Requirement, and is one of the most secure

places in the building. Even the Headmaster's office is easier to gain entry to - mostly because this room is so secret that far fewer people know about it. That secrecy would be lost if we were to invite scads of people in, and the room would be useless for hiding out in after that. So you must agree to keep it private between us, even if we don't agree to use it as our alternate quarters. For the other, there are some VIP quarters near the greenhouses that have been unused in a couple of centuries. The last person to even visit them graduated in 1945, but I just happen to know the password, and they are clean."

"I'll have to look, before I approve of anything," Hermione insisted.

Harry brought her to a stop in a seventh floor corridor, still grinning. Holding her hands, he ordered, "Think of your ideal living quarters, then walk back and forth three times to make the door appear."

Puzzled, she did so.

The room was absolutely perfect.

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Author's Notes:

It's been pointed out that Dumbledore LIED when he told Harry the prophecy. "Neither can live while the other survives" was plainly untrue, unsupported by any of the facts. Voldemort went about his merry old way having fun and doing what he liked for years after getting a body back but before the final battle, and Harry's misery was all Dumbledore's doing (which hardly counts as being mandated by Destiny).

When you consider the actual facts as they worked out in book seven. The way it was revealed there was that for Voldemort to die, Harry had to die first, and vice versa.

So, the true prophecy should have been closer to the facts, "Neither can DIE while the other survives."

Because that's the way the resolution worked. The way Rowling wrote it, one of them had to die before the other could be eliminated.

According to book seven, so long as Voldy lived, Harry could survive death, and vice versa.

However, no manipulative old coot worth his lemon drops would allow either of two parties capable of destroying each other, but undefeatable except by the other, pair up in any kind of partnership. So he'd arrange to get the two of them at each other's throats, preferably in a form of mutual destruction.

So, in the original books, Dumbledore lied.

But now that Harry's learned it 'from the source' as it were, he can take arrangements to suit his own goals. And, if it were possible, he'd try to get Voldemort turned to stone, or otherwise permanently incapacitated without being dead. That way he'd keep his own oracular protection, without letting an enemy loose to do harm.

And, make no mistake, he considers Voldemort his enemy. It's just that Dumbledore is a far more immediate one.

Chapter Five by Lionheart

|||

Harry sent off three letters via school owls. One was to the luggage shop, an order for two chests of drawers and a nightstand done in the same style as the rest of his travel furniture. Seeing as how he'd be moving his quarters every night from one place to another, so he could keep up a 'three days for one' schedule, he wanted to complete his bedroom set, so he didn't forget anything. Running into himself looking for a lost toothbrush would be bad.

Well, at least it would upset Hermione.

Second of those letters was to the Safari shop. The stereotypical British explorer of the 19th century that shop seemed set up to outfit a magical counterpart of was a naturalist as much as anything else, so the kit had included tools for taking samples and specimens. However, he'd overtaxed the storage capacity of his instruments in rendering down the dead basilisk from the Chamber of Secrets.

The thing was over sixty feet long. It had more mass than any elephant, and some whales; every part of the beast was useful and valuable, even precious, so it wasn't to be wasted.

Tom had an... interesting collection of spells for preserving or reviving dead tissue from his work with immortality, zombies and creating new bodies for himself in event of his own demise. So between those and the recent and undisturbed condition of the corpse, Harry was able to harvest ingredients at near prime condition. And that basilisk was better than solid gold, being the largest and oldest specimen in recorded history. He simply had to have more tools and containers so he could harvest and store it all!

Not one bit could be wasted, as there wasn't going to be another.

Actually, there was. Harry'd already been down to the Chamber with a freshly caught toad, and a visit to Hagrid's hut had yielded an egg out of his chicken coop. Riddle had known all of the required spells,

so, in the proper course of time, a new basilisk was going to hatch down in the Chamber. And Harry had every intention of feeding it and caring for it, training up a useful servant, because a basilisk was just too useful a beast not to have one on tap!

But the new one wasn't going to be a thousand years old for another thousand years or so. So that made it still a priority to carefully harvest the old one.

The third letter was an order for more books.

It really wasn't necessary. Harry had the entire library of Hogwarts at his disposal, even if certain parties were ignorant of just how complete his access to it was. Security charms by a librarian were not about to stop someone the equal of a dark lord of Voldemort's caliber, nor were copyright wards any protection. Nobody lived once Voldemort decided to kill them, and that meant penetrating the deepest, thickest, nastiest sets of wards in the world. No common spell was going to stop him from copying a book he wanted a copy of. And he even had an invisibility cloak to do his browsing under.

Still, as nice as it was to be duplicating the Hogwarts library, it was useful to have an even more complete private collection. There were gaps in what was available at Hogwarts, even in the restricted section. But more important than acquiring books, Dumbledore, who was watching his mail, would be determining what Harry was learning, in part, by what books he was ordering.

And so Harry gave Dumbledore reason to believe that he was studying Light magic like healing and other such things.

It was even true.

In another reality, at another time, Dumbledore would admit that Voldemort had what was probably the most extensive knowledge of magic of any wizard living. Of course, by that point Albus had killed off Nicholas Flamel, who had probably forgotten more than anyone else had ever learned, just from the amount of time he'd had available for study.

But Voldemort had preferred the easy power of darker mysteries, the lure of the forbidden had been a siren song to the young dark lord, and Harry was not as well armed with light side magic as he'd like to be. So he was, at the same time, building up one of his areas of semi-ignorance, as well as making sure the Dark Headmaster would be appeased concerning his perfect Golden Gryffindor. Having displayed disturbing signs of backbone, Albus would be ready to call Harry 'Dark' on that pretext alone, and needed to be reassured the boy was simply polishing up on his hero badge.

That, too, was even to a large extent true.

Harry, having absorbed Voldemort's knowledge, had little reason to study up on the dark arts. What books could teach him anything new on that subject were few and far between, not to mention both rare and expensive. And he suspected that most of them were probably hidden away in the private Black family library anyway, to which no one had access at the moment.

Most Death Eaters joined Tom's cause thinking they would hide something, hold some of their abilities and secrets back in reserve. None of them were aware that part of the Dark Mark's properties was to intentionally strip away any mental protection they might have had from their lord and master, who'd routinely scanned the minds of all who'd joined him, demanding their perfect and utter obedience, or death.

So Tom had known small things, like Pettigrew's animagus form and abilities, to larger secrets like the extent of the Malfoy fortune, and purebloods who had any abilities at all would find them demanded, by name, by their dark lord.

However, poor Regulus had simply been unaware of the extent, true nature, or list of titles on the library his family had been collecting for generations. There were many dark tomes in there, he was sure, but the Black child been an ignorant believer, not a diligent reader.

There were so very few secrets the ancient, pureblooded families had held back from Voldemort successfully, but the nature of that library was one of them. Although there had been tantalizing hints in plenty.

And, while Voldemort would kill to know what few secrets remained hidden to him that lurked in that collection (actually, point of fact, Voldemort would kill for an ice cream cone and then not eat it) Harry had no such inclination. He already knew enough dark magic, thank you very much. It only did a few kinds of things, and those he could already accomplish in any number of ways by drawing on skills he'd already inherited.

Adding a slight refinement to his already well polished Dark magic lore held no interest for the lad. No, he was actually quite happy to study Light. And, if by doing so he could allay some of the old coot's fears concerning him, so much the better.

Actually, Harry had little reason to study for his classes, either.

He did so anyway.

Of course, the actual coursework took no more than minutes to review and confirm that he'd already mastered it all. There were times he ran across tidbits he was previously unaware of, and those times were truly what he did this for. He was reinforcing his knowledge and filling in any gaps. Things were taught differently now than they were fifty years ago, and sometimes more or less material got covered.

Those times it was more, he learned something, those times it was less, he got to teach Hermione something. Both of those were worthy goals.

Still, on the whole, review of his coursework took only a few minutes, and with a set of dictation quills it didn't take him but a few more minutes to have all of his homework done. That left hours and hours for independent study, pushing the boundaries of what he knew.

And, sometimes doing research, pushing the boundaries of what the entire magical world knew by discovering new things by means of experiments.

One had to stay busy somehow, and Hogwarts had so many resources to draw on! Voldemort hadn't made repeated attempts to

return there for his health! No, he'd done it because he was not yet done probing the old castle's secrets, research that Harry was only too glad to continue! And that wasn't the only project boiling on his burner.

Harry watched the owls fly off, then returned to his quarters.

Those three letters had been sent off as much because they were expected as from any other reason. Harry had shown an independent streak, and the natural progression of that had to be shown, or else Albus would probe until he found it. So, if the boy was to keep any secrets at all, it would be best to show the Headmaster what he believed ought to be there.

For the time being, anyway.

That would do the best preparatory work for leaving old man out of position when Harry whiplashed around and did something unexpected. The letters of real importance he'd already mailed from a shop outside the Ministry on his trip the previous day.

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After dinner in the Ravenclaw common room was an opportunity to get some work done. A substantial portion of the House gathered at the tables, read the books (everyone who didn't know for certain suspected the Ravenclaws had their own library up in their tower), and did their study, both assigned and optional.

However, a new figure came walking in to the common room, having answered the riddle at the entrance way. Those who saw him fell silent, and a circle of silence spread as the regular whispered tutoring ceased and more and more looked up to see the cause of this disruption.

Harry Potter stepped out into the blue carpeted room, wearing the Diadem of Ravenclaw glimmering on his head, an unmistakable aura of magic around him that none could readily identify.

The Boy Who Lived walked calmly over the carpeted floor, to a somewhat dim (and thus, unpopular) corner, where a young lady with blonde hair had been at a chipped table doing her homework, all alone.

Harry placed his hand carefully on Luna's shoulder in an obvious gesture of friendship, and faced the room. "This young lady has done me a tremendous service. I owe her, and will hear of it if she is... not treated well."

Eyes grew round as the boy subtly shifted his position and general realization spread that he was also wearing the Sword of Gryffindor sheathed at his hip.

The boy popped the top off a bottle of pumpkin juice, acting just as if an entire room was not staring at him, and poured from the bottle into a golden cup, which he offered to Luna. "Care for a drink?"

She shot him startled eyes, then nodded, accepted the cup and drank, then offered it gingerly back.

Harry accepted back the goblet, gave her a smile, nodded to her, and left as casually as if he'd visited the place every day and was not the center of attention.

On the threshold he paused, and as if just having thought of something, and leaned back to call into the room, "Oh, and I'll be holding a study group of my own later this month to share a few things I've picked up. You're all welcome to come, of course. Luna will have all the necessary contact information once I start setting it up."

Once he'd gone Luna was predictably swarmed with curious Ravenclaws, and among the invitations to share better tables, offers to study partner, and girls slipping off to return stolen things to Luna's trunk, one question came in from an innocent first year who'd never done Luna any wrong.

"Why did that man offer you a drink? Were you thirsty?"

The blonde looked down on a girl, only a year or so younger than her, gazing back at her innocently. After desperately thinking of something to say, she swallowed heavily and settled on the truth. "When someone offers you a chance to drink from a chalice as sought after and rare as the Cup of Helga Hufflepuff, there's no polite way to refuse."

Shocked silence spread outward as if from a physical blast of pressure.

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"You realize you've just stepped out of reality and into the realm of myth, don't you?" Hermione asked, teasingly hefting her books, which she clutched to her chest in an effort to hide her growing attraction, despite the thick robes doing it for her. Tossing her hair, she added, "I mean, at first you were just The-Boy-Who-Lived, and only person ever recorded to have survived a killing curse. Now you're the first person to be seen with the Diadem of Ravenclaw since the Founder herself died, and as if that weren't enough, you had to show off your possession of artifacts of two more. People will be half expecting you to be conversing with Merlin in the halls!"

Hermione flicked more hair out of her face. "What with that 'Heir of Slytherin' nonsense going on last year, people will think you are the heir to all four of the Founders."

"If I could've arranged it, I would've worn Slytherin's locket in there as well." Harry told her in reply, hurrying her along a corridor. "I know that cave where it's hidden, but couldn't get away for long enough to retrieve it."

Hermione looked on him in confusion. "But why do you want people to be all excited about you? There will be more books about you before the year is out, I'm certain of it! Whatever happened to wanting to be 'just Harry'?"

He gave her a warm smile in return, and continued hustling her along under the cover of his invisibility cloak. Wherever place he wanted to go, he wanted to get there in a hurry. "Everyone capable of seeing

'just Harry' already knows me that way. And that person is you. I think it's time for everyone else to see some glimpses of The-Boy-Who-Lived they've been looking for. I've been disappointing them on that point for years."

"You know, Ron sees you as you are," Hermione defended. But her companion vigorously shook his head.

"No," Harry disagreed. "Tell me, how many empty compartments did you pass by on your search for Neville's toad, on our train ride that first year?"

"Dozens." Hermione shrugged in confusion. "It wasn't very full. They can't pack the train too full, for fear of pressing students who don't get along too tightly together, and starting conflicts. They also can't tell beforehand how many friends will want to share compartments, as opposed to couples who want to be alone together, so there has to be some wiggle room. And that year it was very open, with lots of people clustered together."

Harry nodded, still speeding them along stealthily. "When Ron stuck his head in the door of my compartment, he said everywhere else was full. Plus, I was left outside the platform without instructions as to how to get on, when his mother came by using wizard only words like 'muggle' and asking her children to tell her the number for the platform. I latched onto them and they helped me on. Now, can you tell me what's suspicious about that?"

The bushy haired girl's face scrunched up in concentration. "But that's not right!" she blurted in sudden indignation. "How could you be left without any directions at all for how to find a magically hidden train platform?"

"And don't forget, Molly Weasley graduated from Hogwarts herself, and had two grown children who'd already passed through the full course of years there, another who was newly a prefect, two third years, and Ron. Tell me, when was the last time they changed the platform to get to Hogwarts."

"Never," Hermione got lost in thought. "They built it that way. I read about it in Hogwarts: A History, how they ran the track, and..." sudden realization came. "Someone wanted you to know the Weasleys? And Ron? Do you think he could've used that excuse just to ride with you?"

"That's what I think exactly," Harry returned. "I even know who did it, too."

"Who?" Hermione was suddenly burning with curiosity.

"A lover of torture who laughs aloud while the innocent weep, and to all pleas for mercy turns stone deaf ears."

"That's not very specific," Hermione frowned.

"Do you know Shakespeare?" he asked.

"Yes." Hermione was beginning to feel upset at his dancing around without divulging her requested information.

"Tell me, do you know the quote: A man can smile, and smile, and be a villain."

"Yes, of course." Hermione rolled her eyes. "Although that's not the most famous Shakespeare quote, it ranks up there, having been popular for many reasons over the intervening centuries."

"Well, there's your clue."

She scowled at him.

"Alright," he relented. "I'll offer one other. It's an authority figure, and you know him."

"Snape doesn't smile," she objected.

He gave a short laugh. "Alright, one other: Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing."

Hermione put on her problem solving face. "So, it's either the classic example of someone who looks innocent, but isn't, or, since we're in the magical world it could be an actual werewolf."

"That's enough of a clue to get you started," Harry agreed. It was better she figure it out for herself, connecting facts to find the culprit. That way she'd believe her own evidence. Whereas, if he just came straight out and said it was Dumbledore, she'd never be able to credit it.

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"There you go, Bella," Narcissa said, handing her sister back her wand, which had been secretly preserved for her by the Malfoys since her arrest.

Bellatrix LeStrange held crinkling in her hand a letter from her beloved lord. It was his handwriting, his signature, his powerful magic all over it, bearing the touch of his own wand! And, as if to mock his enemies, it bore a postage stamp of being mailed from just outside the Ministry of Magic.

That was her Lord's cruel humor at work, too.

Included in a rune on the parchment visible only to those who bore a Dark Mark had been a wand Bellatrix had been told to use to escape her cell at Azkaban. And she had done so, resorting quickly to the refuge of her sister's house shortly after, so she could equip for her assignment.

Bellatrix accepted her own wand from her sister, treasuring it's feel, before returning once more to peruse the most important section of that letter.

The mission it gave her was a strange one, but she would earnestly give it her all - Protect Harry Potter. Her dark lord and master needed the boy alive if he was to succeed in his resurrection ritual, so he would have Harry Potter alive. Bellatrix would see to that!

And the irony of possessing the body of the wizarding world's hero, taking the flesh of Potter as his own! Yes. Bellatrix licked her lips. That was an irony that had her master's touch all over it.

Harry Potter would be the new vessel for Lord Voldemort's consciousness!

She would've been much less enthused about her mission if she'd known that Harry had been the one to write that letter and sent her Pettigrew's wand. Having absorbed Tom Riddle's skills and memories gave him ability to use the dark lord's handwriting style, speech patterns and wand. So not even Tom himself could've written a more authentic seeming note.

The mission Harry'd assigned her in the dark idiot's name was a transparent excuse to get himself a guardian not controlled by either Dumbledore or the Ministry, and the story he'd cooked up to get her to believe it was something that could be true, and had been within the dark lord's powers... up until his soul fragment had been destroyed, that is. So it wasn't going to happen, but Bella believed it was.

That meant she'd throw her heart and soul into her duty of protecting him.

And she didn't mind at all that he'd taken the liberty of burgling her vault to get that cup he'd entrusted to her, for the purpose of granting supporting magic to the rituals of resurrection he was about to perform - supposedly.

In reality, Harry had already destroyed the horcrux out of the cup and diadem, and was using them for tasks closer to their original purposes, as both artifacts held plenty of powers left by their original owners, the Hogwarts Founders.

But she believed Harry was about to be her beloved dark lord reborn, and so long as she believed that she'd be slavishly loyal to him, and that served Harry's purposes just fine.

Although, Voldemort would probably be ticked with her if he ever returned and learned she'd been consorting with and supporting his most deadly enemy.

Of course, should that ever happen, Harry would do his best to convince her that the true Voldemort was an impostor. Shouldn't be too hard, either. He had a substantial lead on the actual dark lord.

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Author's Notes:

It's not terribly often I rewrite a whole chapter, but this one deserved it. The first draft of it had stunk pretty badly, and I wasn't happy with it. So we get this version to be posted.

Can you believe I'd actually ventured into angst on the first draft? Lck!

Chapter Six
by Lionheart

|||

Having Voldemort's perspective on things was changing Harry.

For one thing, he was thinking farther ahead than ever before, and taking the time to classify things he'd never thought of before.

For example, he now considered Voldemort to be a classic 'Dark Slytherin', because Slytherins loved power, and Tom Riddle was working harder than anyone had in nearly a century to gather all power to himself, while at the same time denying it to others.

Dumbledore, however, on the same model came in as a 'Dark Ravenclaw', in that Ravenclaws loved knowledge, and HIS classic operational scheme was to gather all information unto himself, while carefully denying it to others. Most of what he did was gather more and more knowledge to himself via spies and informants and whatnot, and control who else knew what. Because if he could control what others knew, he could easily dictate what they'd do.

Both of them used very similar means to set others running about at their beck and call, and to make themselves indispensable to their own followers. Voldemort used his power to force people to do his bidding. But Dumbledore used his knowledge to trick people into doing his, 'For the Greater Good'. And, since they didn't know the reasons why they shouldn't, they did them!

Exact same patterns of behavior, just different means of accomplishing the same thing. Each wanted to rule the magical world, and each sat at the heart of their own webs, like a spider tugging strings. Only rarely did the creature at the center of each network get involved directly in anything other than the routine management of their organization.

It was shocking how many parallels there were between them.

To continue along this line of conjecture, Harry supposed one could postulate a 'Dark Gryffindor' could be concerned with gathering all glory unto himself, and for that he wondered if Gilderoy Lockhart had actually been a member of that house. Although there had been only limited signs of his having used his glory to get others to do things other than buy his books.

But what could you call a 'Dark Hufflepuff'? Someone who wanted to gather all friends to himself? How could that even be considered dark? Well, okay, supposing they took those friends by the same foul means other styles of Dark Lords took the things they wanted, by cheating, stealing, hurting and killing, but that behavior didn't exactly make any friends, now did it?

Oh well. He'd have to study more history, but he didn't think offhand history had produced any Dark Hufflepuff Lords to use as a comparative example.

Which, when you think about it, might be one reason some considered them a house of duffers.

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Care of Magical Creatures class had been wonderful, a splendid affair with truly informative hands on interactions to go with meaty lectures. Harry had loved the flight the hippogriff had granted him, and made ovatures to the beast so as to be allowed to do many more of the same in the future.

Other brave students had ventured the same. Hermione had even done so, pronouncing the entire experience more pleasant than her rides on a broom.

Harry privately suspected that most of her reluctance to indulge in the typical form of magical flight came as a result of the poor quality of the Hogwarts brooms, and had already purchased Hermione a better one for her birthday. It was neither fast nor stylish, but it was stable and gave a gentle, easy ride - qualities he was sure would appeal to her.

She didn't need a racing broom to learn on any more than she'd enjoyed the broken down, swaybacks they'd used for flying class. The first obstacle they had to overcome together was her fear of falling off, only then could she start to become a proficient flier.

And it was one of those skills too useful not to need every so often.

Care of Magical Creatures class came to an end, and Harry volunteered to help put some of the noble animals back in their pens. Hermione was even helping. But he was off alone, cut off from view by the shack, when a soft chuckling came from behind a stable wall.

"Potty, Potty, Potter," Bellatrix singsonged, coming out with her wand. "Do you know what the Dark Lord plans for you?"

Harry went stiff, then allowed his features to contort in a rictus, and pushed magic out into his eyes for them to glow red. Copying Voldemort's features and expression was hardly a chore, since he knew them so well. "Bella, you came, my most trusted servant!"

"Yes, my lord!" She sang rapturously.

"The boy," Harry breathed, imitating Voldemort's voice from his first live conflict with the possessed Quirrel. "Has use to me, as I told you. Leave him among his friends. They won't suspect him, and when I return, they will be an extra source of power to me."

"Yes, my lord!" Bellatrix sank to her knees in adoration.

"The caretaker, Filch," Harry wheezed out in Voldemort's tones, copying how the dark lord might say things if he were in this position. "Replace him. You will find polyjuice in plenty tucked in the passageway behind your old dorm room. I have supplied you with a bed, and furniture there. Refrain from killing the caretaker, only subdue him and control his memories so he does not realize his situation. You may release him at nights, when you have no need of his appearance, to pursue his cleaning tasks. This will free you to watch over this body during the day, when Potter is out and vulnerable."

"Of course! Genius, my lord!" the insane Death Eater sang his praises.

Harry found controlling the woman to be easy. She'd believe anything he said, so long as he was copying Voldemort's distinct hushed and hissing whisper. "Confound the caretaker's pet, that it pays heed to your commands. Cause no disturbance, that you be not suspected, and avoid the Headmaster's eyes. Dumbledore routinely scans the minds of those around him, and Filch has no occlumency to protect him, so your shields would alert him to your disguise."

"He shall never know of my presence, my lord," she swore, deep in rapture.

"Snape is not to be trusted. He is the Headmaster's creature, and seeks to profit by my present weakness." Harry offered no explanation for how he 'knew' this. But, strictly speaking, he knew Snape had enjoyed antagonizing and provoking the son of his schooltime nemesis when the child was weak, so in a way it was true.

Bella's face had contorted into a scowl of barely controlled fury. "May I be permitted to deal with him, my lord?"

"Ah, Bella," Harry modulated his Voldemort voice so it was softer, almost in fond (if evil) tones. "In return for your long term of unbroken loyal service, I grant you this boon - you may kill him, but only by means which do not imperil your disguise, even if he should return as a ghost."

"Thank you, my lord," Bellatrix abased herself, proud as she could feel her lord's amusement over her request.

In truth, Harry was amused, because Snape was as loyal to the Dark Lord as it was possible to get. Harry had Riddle's own memory of ORDERING Snape to approach Dumbledore to spy for the Light, and murders of Order members skyrocketed once Snape began supplying Tom information on them. That Albus had allowed this proved that bastard was every bit as ruthless as the man he'd claimed to oppose.

Really, all Dumbledore and Voldemort had been was rivals fighting for control of the same world. They were not so different as many supposed.

But setting one Death Eater on another, granting one permission to kill the other, truly tickled Harry's funny bone. Would that he could arrange for all of his enemies to dispose of each other!

Brrr! Suddenly he had an idea of how Albus had become the sort of creature he was. Harry quickly gave final instructions to the lady he'd duped. "Watch over this body, which shall soon be mine, that it comes to no harm. I give you this charge, Bella, trusting you above all other Death Eaters. Do not fail me."

"It shall be done as you command, my lord!" Bellatrix sang from where she groveled in the mud, face down on her knees.

Harry relaxed the muscles of his face and withdrew the magic making his eyes go red, then went off to the stables as if he could not see Bellatrix, and put his hippogriff away as Hagrid had tasked him to.

Faking possession was actually easier than he'd thought.

When he came back from stabling the hippogriff, Bella was gone. Harry went back to the class area, where Hagrid was talking with Hermione. A quick and subtle mind scan revealed that neither had overheard, or knew anything concerning his giving instructions to an escaped Death Eater.

Good.

Filch had already been tasked by Dumbledore to keep a closer eye on Harry. So this was a gain for him in every department, replacing one of his enemy's agents with a bodyguard of his own, and Dumbledore would simply accept the attention Filch was paying to him as carrying out his own commands.

Excellent.

The actual caretaker could even make regular reports when she released him to go cleaning, and if Bella had been thorough in her memory and Confundus charms (which he felt certain she would be), then Filch would believe he'd been on diligent watch over Harry, and seen nothing out of the ordinary.

The best way to blind a spy was to not let it know it wasn't seeing anything. And creating a blind spot in Dumbledore's web granted Harry some freedom. Not much, not yet, but the rest was coming.

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'Aha! So that's where it is,' Harry thought smugly to himself.

There were vaults beneath Hogwarts, as Gringott's bank hadn't existed back then, and wizards wouldn't have trusted goblins to hold their money even if it had. They'd fought too many wars against each other.

The wizards of today wouldn't trust goblins to do their banking if the wizards had even a lick of sense between them. Goblins lived on cruelty just as house elves lived on service. And you could either be cruel to someone by pillaging their homes, torturing their children, ripping their eyeballs out and dancing on their graves, or you could do it by charging interest rates and ruinous fees.

But the interest rates were less fun, so at some point it was inevitable that a few children were going to go missing. Goblins were like junky addicts who needed their fix, and the more potent the suffering they caused the better. So it was, as it always had been, simply a matter of time before they broke the treaties restraining their actions and went kidnapping innocents again.

The wizards of long ago would have gone to war over such a gross offense. The sheep of today?

Maybe they would, and maybe they wouldn't.

Even Hagrid, who cherished everything deadly, dangerous, dark or nasty had admitted that goblins were not the most friendly folk. Which,

coming from a man who'd name a giant three headed dog Fluffy, kept an acromantula as a pet while still at school, kept a baby dragon in a wooden hut and loved every dangerous beast on the books, was the single most ringing denunciation of any magical creature he'd ever heard from the Groundskeeper!

Actually, Harry'd only ever heard Hagrid condemn three things: Voldemort, goblins, and speaking ill of Albus Dumbledore, who'd given him a career when he'd been thrown out of school.

If even Hagrid couldn't love them, it made sense why wizards of the past hadn't trusted the goblins.

Hogwarts was actually packed with odd storerooms, some more secure than others, where odds and ends and magical treasures got kept, things like the Mirror of Erised (when it wasn't being used by manipulative old Headmasters to bait traps), since they couldn't all be stored in the Headmaster's office.

However, it had actually taken some degree of searching to find the Goblet of Fire. Like most ancient and potent magical treasures, the artifact had many powers. However, most such things tended to wind up on display in a museum-like atmosphere, where nobody tended to use them, or they got put to use for only a fraction of their original functions.

The Goblet of Fire was actually a prime example of such. Its only official use remaining in this age was to serve as a neutral judge to select participants in a tournament that wasn't held anymore. But it actually had a small catalog of wonderful powers. Albus, Harry felt sure, had already made use of several of the goblet's properties for himself.

Harry intended to do the same, but it would take time and preparations.

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On his way back from his discovery in the secret portion of the dungeons, Harry swung by the hospital wing to make a quick check in on patients within.

Where he found Draco Malfoy.

There were worse things to greet your eyes than a helpless opponent. Draco was not Harry's least favorite person, but he came close, and in this sort of situation there came so many possible options for abusing him!

Harry knew enough from Tom's memories to spot a future Death Eater at a glance, and Draco came close to the top of the list - a blindly devoted patriot to the pureblood cause. He'd probably get a mark the instant Voldemort came back. Or, if that failed to happen, he'd follow whatever other dark lord came along, perhaps even striking out to make his own bid in that business.

Beside him on other beds were his two cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, who'd go wherever and do whatever their leader did. So they'd soon have marks too.

Checking the depleted bottles of Skele-grow on their bedside tables, Harry surmised that whatever had happened to the trio, it had broken most every bone in their bodies. Blood replenishing and pain relief potions were also in evidence, so whatever it had been had been ugly.

That certainly explained why the mini-Malfoy hadn't been to any classes yet.

Grinning, Harry drew his wand and worked several spells over the comatose patients, before slipping away to go off to dinner.

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The Great Hall was in something of a tumult, as students craned their heads trying to catch a look of Harry wearing those priceless artifacts. Harry was just waiting for one of the staff's nerves to break and for them to approach him before dropping the next bombshell.

A stiff silence was occurring around him. Ron and Hermione already weren't speaking to each other. On their way back from Hagrid's class, Ron had drawn the girl aside from the other students, come close and asked, since they were best mates, if he couldn't see a flash of Hermione's boobs too.

It was tactless and tasteless and oh so quintessential Ron! Who now sported a bright red slap mark upon his cheek.

Harry supposed he shared part of the blame for the situation, as the one who'd destroyed her pure reputation in the first place. But Ron's hamfisted approach to a claimed girl was just too funny!

Not that he was about to admit that. Ron was to blame for his own actions. Plus, Harry didn't want any part of the silent cold shoulder Hermione was delivering. Of course, she'd found an effective way to snub Ron while still sitting near each other (because Ron was hiding behind Harry), and she'd simply been to speaking to Harry in Old Norse. Neville understood them, so it was making for some fun conversation.

The Ancient Runes class was smaller than Divination or Creatures, but Harry had found enough willing participants to hand around the half dozen language lozenges for Old Norse he'd brought along, earning some goodwill and favors by so doing.

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That evening, when all the students were wending to their beds, Dumbledore joined a small group of Ministry Aurors clustered around the beds of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, there awaiting testimony from the young men concerning who threw them off the train.

Madam Pomphrey had given this as the hour when they were recovered from their ordeal to the point where they could be woken up for a brief interview. The boys were unlikely to be their most coherent, however the Aurors did need a lead to begin pursuing investigations.

"Madam Pomphrey, if you will?"

The mediwitch nodded, going up to fetch her remedy. "Albus, their bodies were nearly completely destroyed. I can't condone countering the pain relief potions that are keeping them unconscious for very long. They need time to rebuild what has been broken!"

"I know, Poppy. But we must have leads."

The nurse nodded. "Very well. This will only counter the numbing potions for a minute, Albus."

She withdrew a large trout from an ice chest and slapped those students in the face with it, instantly waking the trio of Slytherins up. "Huh? Wha! AAAhh!!" Bodies arched in agony, then froze and relaxed into postures of fear and defeat.

Draco and his cronies immediately broke down crying.

"Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore knelt next to the child's bed. "Can you hear me? I am your Headmaster, and you are at school. Can you tell us who did this to you?"

"T.. th.. the... the Colonel!" Draco whimpered and sobbed.

Dumbledore's expression blanked. "I'm afraid I don't know who you're talking about, Mister Malfoy. What Colonel?"

Draco's body trembled in a mixture of fear and sobs. "The.. Colonel! Colonel Sanders! He came for us... out of the dark... holding a plate of his chicken!"

Dumbledore shared a confused look with the pureblooded Aurors, before turning back to question his student. "Can you describe this Colonel, Draco? Do you know what he was doing on the Hogwarts Express?"

"He's terrible..!" Draco began to get drowsy. "White beard... muggle ... Dark Lord! ... selling chicken ... make everyone ... eat it fortnightly..."

"Can you tell us what he did to you?" Dumbledore pressed earnestly.

"... Southern fried ..."

"I'm afraid he's gone back under the effects of the pain relief potions while his body rebuilds." Dumbledore shook his head sadly before turning to the Aurors who had been questioning the other two boys. "Did you get anything?"

Grimly, they nodded. "Yes. Whoever this Colonel is, he has two accomplices, a guy named Barney, who was purple, and we didn't get the name of the last, but he's a doughboy from Pillsbury. Isn't that near Southampton? I know I heard a muggle once talking about a doughboy, some kind of soldier, I think."

"That would seem to fit with the other having an officer's rank," another Auror agreed.

"I shall leave you to investigate these leads," Dumbledore said soberly. Then, when he tried to stand, found himself unable. In shock, he looked down on his hand to see a chicken bone jabbed into his wrist, some substance smeared at the tip, with Draco's hand holding the other end of it, having stabbed him at some point during his delirium.

"FAWKES!!" Dumbledore shouted, just before he fell over, blacking out.

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Author's Notes:

Sometimes, when you want a Dark Lord out of your way, you've just got to try and kill him.

Disposable agents are all in vogue, too.

Chapter Seven

by Lionheart

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Special thanks must go to Rorschach's Blot for granting permission for me to plunder his Odd Ideas folder for good material - in which it abounds. I spent about a week modifying one of the better ones to fit, until I realized that it worked best almost unchanged.

It should make this romp a little more fun for all of us.

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"Thank you, Dobby. That will be all."

Harry smiled, already turning as the grateful house elf disappeared, popping out from behind him. Binding Dobby to his service was one of the best things he'd ever done, and Dobby had already paid for all of the headaches of last year a dozen times over.

It was the end of his third time through the day, and Harry had been going after projects the entire time. Sometimes he was in the library looking up information and copying books, others he was off to Sprout's greenhouses collecting ingredients, or sometimes off to Hagrid's pens doing the same.

All of this frenzy of effort was greatly facilitated by two things: having his father's invisibility cloak, so people didn't see him all over the place all at once (otherwise he'd have been forced to spend most of his extra time in a private room, like Hermione was), and Dobby. The little house elf had been almost pathetically grateful to be Harry's own elf, and with him popping in and out to collect things Harry'd gathered, taking them back to his room and bringing him out tools, the work had gone much more swiftly.

Harry also had an elf that could keep his secrets cleaning his rooms and looking after him. Since the rest of the castle staff of elves all reported to Dumbledore, having the work done by his private elf was another way to blind the Headmaster's agents and keep secrets.

Besides, he liked Dobby. He considered the elf a friend, if a trifle batty.

Then again, who wasn't? This was the wizarding world, after all. Sanity was the rarest sort of magic of all among them.

Under his cloak, Harry passed below the windows of the Hospital Wing, where vast tumult was currently going on. It was highly doubtful Dumbledore would actually die, being both in the hospital wing and in front of Poppy at the time his injury, not to mention having his own pet phoenix on tap. No, against those forces the drop of basilisk venom on the tip of that needle sharp bone would prove ineffectual, he was sure.

However, the special herbs and spices smeared over the shaft near the tip ought to confuse them. The basilisk venom was only a drop, and right on the point at that. It would literally vanish into any injury. It would take a miracle for that to kill him, considering where he was and the resources Albus had to draw on there. However, they would have a pretty time wondering over how a bunch of seasonings and flavorings caused shock and symptoms like venom from the most dangerous snake known.

Also, Albus would be mustering considerable resources to look for a muggle by the name of Colonel Sanders, and anything diverting time and attention away from examining Harry under a microscope was a good thing.

Of course, it remained to be seen if the subtle dark curse on that bone would do its job or not.

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"Harry, may I have a word with you in private?" Luna asked as she found him on his way to breakfast, having waited just outside the Great Hall on what was for everyone (except him and Hermione) the second day of classes.

"Sure Luna," Harry agreed, stopping his advance. "What is it?"

"Well." Luna quietly drew him aside, down a hallway, into an unused classroom which she then proceeded to magically lock and place privacy charms around, some fairly advanced ones, Harry noted.

"You've put me in something of a bind," she admitted, once she was sure they were secure.

Harry cleaned off a dusty desk with a wand flick to have something to sit on, then sat on it, looking at her soberly.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," he declared, before offering, "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

"I think I'd better," she agreed. "But first, I was wondering if you'd be interested in significantly weakening Voldemort's forces?"

"How?" the boy probed, carefully. Most people viewed the Dark Lord as no longer a threat, so her offer of help against him was unexpected to say the least - though not unwelcome.

"As many as three murders and as few as one," Luna frankly replied, not bothering to conceal a thing. "Depending on your godfather."

"Why don't you explain?" Harry said, it was not a request.

"You know how important Lucius Malfoy is to to Voldemort don't you?" Luna asked intently. "Wars are won by gold after all..."

"And Malfoy has a lot of gold," Harry sighed. That was one of his problems. The Potter fortunes, while generous for his own use, were wholly inadequate to serve as a war chest. "So you're saying we should kill him?"

"At a minimum," Luna agreed. "Unless you can find a way to neutralize Narcissa and Draco without killing them then they will have to go as well."

"I take it that you have a way to do that, don't you?" Harry asked calmly, Luna had dropped her mask and Harry figured that it was only polite to do the same.

"Your godfather Sirius is the head of the Black family," Luna explained. "If he were to die on his attempt to murder you, then you, as his heir, would have the power to dissolve Lucius's marriage to Narcissa."

Harry leaned back on his desk. "It might interest you to know that Sirius Black is entirely innocent on all charges placed against him. He was never even given a trial. Here," Harry reached down into his bookbag, pulling out a sheaf of notes, which he then offered to her. "After Peter Pettigrew was captured alive and proven to be a Death Eater, I insisted on being present for the questioning, which took place immediately, and I had an auto-notes quill running. I was going to offer them to you for a third exclusive article, but you haven't done anything yet on the last set of notes I gave you."

"There is a reason for that, and I'm coming to it," Luna admitted. "If Sirius Black could be cleared, he can do it. Otherwise you might want to ask him to relinquish his position to you. But it doesn't matter who does it, the Head of the Black family must dissolve Narcissa's marriage."

"Why?" Harry's tone came clear as a knife.

"Once Lucius Malfoy dies, someone is going to inherit the estate. Normally that would be his wife or child, who would answer Voldemort's call as quickly as he would, funding him with their money. But if the marriage were to be dissolved, they couldn't touch the fortunes. It was a political match to enhance the power of both families, the Malfoy is a rich and upcoming house while the Black family is on the decline. Lucius could, of course, remarry Narcissa or adopt Draco into his family unless..."

"He was dead," Harry nodded.

"The timing would be the tricky part," Luna mused. "It would all have to be done in the same day... in the same hour if possible."

"What would happen to the Malfoy fortune then?" Harry inquired with a raised eyebrow.

"It would go to the closest blood relative, Lucius Malfoy's niece... me." Luna admitted.

"You?" Harry was surprised. From Voldemort's memories, he'd known Lucius had a sister, but...

"Lucius was my mother's older brother," Luna said with a cold smile. "I won't miss him."

"I see." And, in point of fact, Harry did.

The girl gave a deliberately casual shrug. "Not to mention the fact that it will cause my poor cousin Draco no end of trouble when his status as a pureblood is gone."

"Really? How would that go away?" Of course, Voldemort had been a wee bit obsessed about blood power and purebloods, so Harry knew quite a bit about their culture - more than most of them did, to be honest, but couldn't think of a way to lose pureblood status completely without being named a blood traitor (something he couldn't imagine Draco would ever be in danger of) or having one's impure ancestry revealed.

Everybody was concealing a bit of shameful past somewhere, even if it was only cousins cast out for marrying muggleborns.

Luna fidgeted, misinterpreting his question as ignorance. "Well... Harry, the first thing you have to know is that there are different levels of pureblood. Status is based on a combination of money and how long you can trace your magical line. The Potter family for example is about the middle of both, while the Weasley family has a long line but no money, and the Lovegoods are on the short end of each, respectable but not significant, just another junior pureblood family."

Ah, it was just loss of status, not heredity. That resolved his confusion. Someone taking a tumble down the social ladder occurred regularly. "What about the Malfoy family?"

"High on money but it's a relatively new family," Luna replied. "Which is why Lucius married Narcissa, the Black family has no money but the Ancient in their motto is not just for show like the Noble is. Lucky thing really, if it weren't for that then we wouldn't be able to go through with this plan."

"What do you mean?"

"The marriage of Lucius Malfoy to Narcissa Black sealed the alliance between the families," Luna explained. "Breaking the alliance would cause some... bad things to happen, very bad things. You can, or I should say that you'd be able as Head of House Black, to dissolve Narcissa and Lucius's marriage. You would then have to arrange a new marriage between a member of House Black and House Malfoy."

"What?"

"You could marry me... or have Sirius do it I suppose," Luna mused. "If we do things correctly then Draco will be frozen out and the only person able to fulfill the agreement on the Malfoy side is me. The only ones on the other side are yourself and Sirius... unless Nymphadora can transform all the way, I'm not sure if that would work but it's a possibility."

"We have to get married?" Harry lofted an eyebrow.

"I have to get married," Luna corrected. "You have a bit of wiggle room, I'd prefer it to be you, but..."

"I need to think about this," Harry said with a shudder. "I can't just... I need to think about this."

"I understand Harry," Luna sighed in disappointment. "But please agree, even if you don't want me yourself, please agree to this."

"Why is this so important to you?"

"Because by and large, Malfoys don't die in accidents."

"I don't... your mother?"

"Was a threat," Luna agreed. "And so were you and so am I."

"Me?"

"Sirius named you his heir about a week after you were born," Luna said calmly. "Lucius lost the court case to have his son named heir to the Black family the week before my mother died... as chance would have it, he also stopped petitioning to have Sirius given the kiss the same week."

"You're saying he's responsible for Sirius being put in Azkaban?" Harry asked intently. "And for the death of your mum?"

"I'm saying that members of the Malfoy family don't tend to die in accidents," Luna said firmly. "And that that was a particularly convenient week for my dear Uncle. I'm not saying any more than that, I will say however that it was what convinced the Hat to put me in Ravenclaw."

"Why?"

"Slytherin Luna is a threat, but not a large one. With Snape in control of the house she won't be difficult to break or dispose of," Luna spoke in an odd tone. "Gryffindor Luna is just as bad, courageous but also a black mark on the Malfoy name, she'll have to come to some misfortune. Hufflepuff Luna is also bad, but since she never really had friends it wasn't much of a possibility. Ravenclaw Luna on the other hand... she's not as bad as the other three but she'll have to work to convince the world that she's harmless, not too hard mind you, Ravensclaws have no common sense and wouldn't look under the surface of something if they didn't have to."

"So that's why you're always doing odd things," Harry said.

"Loony Lovegood isn't a threat," Luna explained with a shrug. "And no one takes her seriously, you'd be surprised what people will say around you when they think you won't understand what they say."

Much the same way that innocent and good Harry gets overlooked, no one questions it."

Harry was nodding. "But then I had to go and put my finger in by placing you under the aegis of my personal protection."

The sharing of the cup was very old, hearkening to the earliest times when a visitor was offered water to ease a parched throat. His formal gesture of friendship to her told the rest of the Ravens in no uncertain terms that Luna was under Harry's protection. That he used Hufflepuff's cup while carrying Gryffindor's sword and wearing Rowena's diadem only helped to impress the pants off of everyone there, reinforcing the image of him being able to carry through on that protection.

It also took her out of obscurity and bumped her up several levels on the threat category of people like Lucius Malfoy, who she'd previously been very successfully avoiding. He had, in effect, very thoroughly stripped away that defense by offering her his protection.

Okay, so that was it. He had volunteered himself as her protector, and here she was asking for his, rather proactive, protection against her family. It was time he owned up.

Other plans would have to be abandoned. But, he HAD offered...

"I'm in," Harry said suddenly. He smiled, it wasn't a nice smile, it was the smile of a boy who'd spent ten years living in a cupboard and working as a slave. "I presume you have a plan... wife?"

There was an honest pang in there, saying that, as he had been planning out a campaign for netting himself Hermione. Harry honestly considered the girl to be prime future bride material.

He had many reasons for this, ranging from the sentimental, she was the first girl who was truly kind or thoughtful toward him, to the Machiavellian, she was the smartest witch in their year, and as such a tremendous asset.

But, also the proverbial: best friends make the best spouses.

Still, whatever the reasons (and they were many, more than he'd bothered to catalog, really), they hardly mattered anymore, as he had a debt of honor he had to be repaying to Luna for that article - not that he expected to suffer doing it, Luna was almost as nice a catch, and it was still early enough to let Hermione down gently.

"Not yet beloved," Luna giggled, noting and pretending not to note emotions playing out on his face, spelling out his thoughts as though he'd spoken them aloud. He concealed them well, but hadn't had her years of practice. Most wizards tended to rely on magic to shield their minds and forgot about body language. Still, her own plans could get modified in reply. "I can't wait to see the look on Draco's face when he realizes he doesn't have a name."

"What's that mean?" Harry got yanked back to present scheming, out of lost thoughts over defunct plans with Hermione.

"Like I said before," she shrugged, "there are different levels of pureblood. When the marriage is dissolved then Draco loses the Malfoy name, unless you're willing to take him into the Black family then he drops to the lowest rung of the pureblood pecking order."

"So what am I then?" Harry asked. That was something Tom's memories did not address, but had to have been talked over by important people in the proper circles in the meantime. "I thought since I was a half blood that..." he trailed off upon seeing her smile.

"You're different," Luna said with a grin. "You're a wild card, one can insert you into any level without too much difficulty. One must remember that you are not simply Harry Potter, you are also 'the-boy-who-lived' and that is a title that carries quite a bit of weight."

"I see, so where do we start?"

"You're going to need at least one mistress," Luna mused, changing her plans on the fly to improve her chances of staying Harry's bride and not getting pawned off onto Sirius. She could still see the pang in Harry's eye over the loss of his Hermione, and decided not to come between him and that, when it could only cost her in the long run to

do so. "I've worked up a short list of possible candidates but the decision is of course yours."

"Why do I need a mistress?" Harry demanded, wondering why Tom hadn't researched this, before an answer came to him: Voldemort had sacrificed his sexual organs as part of one of those rituals to gain immortality - symbolism was important to magic, and by destroying his ability to replace himself in the circle of life during powerful magical rites, he got to extend his own place in it indefinitely, theoretically.

Actually, all he'd gotten was an ageless state that paired nicely with the 'return from death' option from his horcruxes. Neither worked terribly well without the other, as old age was one of the few deaths a horcrux couldn't save you from, a soul having only so much duration for staying 'in life' as it were, and once that time limit was up, when the natural span allotted to a man expired, his horcruxes would ordinarily just die of old age with him.

Being ageless got around that nicely. But it wasn't very good to be immune to the march of years only to get knifed in the back, either.

All of the magical routes to immortality had loopholes like that, it was the reason they didn't have hundreds of dark wizards cluttering up every den and alley. So Tom had doubled up, thinking to get around that by using strengths of one style of dark immortality ritual to cover the weaknesses of his other.

But that was why Tom Riddle hadn't been terribly interested in forming a dynasty - he'd never intended to leave anything to anyone, because he'd never intended to go!

So he'd paid no interest to how to form a proper magical family of his own.

"Social standing," Luna explained, drawing Harry back from his instant of contemplation. "You don't actually have to do anything with her... or him I suppose, but you need to maintain at least one to show that you can afford the expense."

"What about you?"

"It's tolerated so long as I'm discreet and wait until after your heir is born," Luna replied. "It's accepted after your heir has a heir of his own, why do you ask?"

"What?"

"Oh Harry, I wasn't planning to have a boyfriend on the side. You don't have to worry about that."

"Then why do you want me to have a girl on the side?" Harry demanded.

"I told you," Luna sighed in exasperation. "Social standing. You'll look like a saint if you marry poor Loony Lovegood, you'll look like an idiot if you don't have someone on the side to keep you relaxed."

"Why should I care about social standing?" Harry said with what Luna thought to be an adorable pout.

"Because like it or not you are an icon," Luna explained. "If we can provide you as an alternate to Voldemort then I'm sure we can get at least a few of the families to side with you, if we can start a credible rumor that one of Voldemort's grand parents was a muggle or something along those lines then we may be able to lure a few families away from his side. None of that is possible if you don't go through the correct motions."

"Why?" Harry, for all of his memories, still had very little experience, and the rapid flip-flops of topic she was so adept at kept mildly confusing him.

"Because the more people on our side the faster this war will end in our favor," Luna said in exasperation. "The less we have the faster it will end in their favor."

"No," Harry scratched his head innocently, "I mean why should we start a rumor that one of Voldemort's grandparents was a muggle?"

"Because it'll make him less palatable to the purebloods," Luna said slowly. "Would you like me to explain that?"

"Why should we start a rumor if we can prove that one of his parents was a muggle?" Harry asked, in the dawning stages of a plan.

"What?" Luna asked in shock.

"His father was a muggle," Harry repeated. "Didn't you know that?"

"You can prove this?" She asked intently.

"Shouldn't be too difficult," Harry agreed. "He told me so himself, one of those times I was facing him, and he gave me enough information tracking down the rest shouldn't be too hard. Actually, here's a little trick he showed me when we were fighting in the Chamber of Secrets last year."

Using his wand, Harry wrote out the sentence, "I am Lord Voldemort." Then, with a deliberately flashy swish of his wand, had the letters rearrange to the name, "Tom Marvolo Riddle."

He pointed to the still glowing letters. "This is the dark lord's birth name. He and his muggle father share the same first and last names. The only thing he got from his mother's side was a distinctive middle name: Marvolo, after his maternal grandfather, but which pegs his mother as Merope Gaunt, a witch who was known to be mooning after a muggle in town, and frequently berated by her poor but pure father for lusting after a rich but magicless boy whose name happened to be Tom Riddle - also the name of a student who appeared at Hogwarts some eleven years and nine months after Tom Riddle, the muggle, who had confused his parents by running off with the witch, went back to his wealthy family claiming he'd been ensnared. Between Hogwarts student records, muggle social services for the orphanage he grew up at, and town records at Little Hangleton, where his parents lived, we ought to be able to nail down every part of this until it's rock solid. The Dark Lord is a Half-Blood, and son of a muggle."

"Oh..." Luna went cross eyed and she shuddered in pleasure. "Harry, you know just what to say to a girl don't you?"

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Author's Notes:

One insane idea is good, but they get so much more interesting when they can bounce reflections off each other in kaleidoscopic arrays!

Harry Potter is one of those universes where catastrophe gets piled upon disaster for the main character and the abuse never seems to stop. Most of the victories he gains are just to have one source of pain or another stop for a short amount of time.

He is outnumbered, outclassed, not given space to maneuver, and those he counts as allies all turn on him to one degree or another: Dumbledore won't listen, Ron has gotten angry and/or jealous enough several times to cut lose their friendship, Hermione picks Ron over Harry, and Ginny is at best a minor character who has little impact, while all of the adults of their acquaintance are Dumbledore's servants first, and Harry's friends a distant second.

That is a world that requires serious powerups on the side of Light just to stay even, and I find it both wonderfully refreshing, and desirable in every aspect to see it happen.

Having Harry achieve something without getting hospitalized for weeks doing so is a wonderful change from the original material.

Of course, I love to see the light triumphant in any universe.

Chapter Eight
by Lionheart

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"It is good to see you feeling better, Albus," McGonagall greeted her lifelong acquaintance. Then asked in sober seriousness, "Is there any news on your attacker?"

"I have learned this muggle Dark Lord is based out of Kentucky, where he is apparently well known, and have lodged a formal protest with the United States for not keeping him properly contained." Albus returned with equal seriousness. "Their ambassador, however, had the effrontery to laugh at my brief. I spoke with him quite severely that Dark Lords operating this openly are a threat to all, but in return he assured me that Colonel Harland Sanders was a threat to no one."

"A threat to no one? After your attack?" McGonagall's eyebrows lifted.

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed, nodding seriously. "It makes me fear how greatly this Colonel's influence has corrupted their Ministry, as in practically the same breath he also vowed that Colonel Sander's influence would be felt so long as chickens roamed the Earth - which, I must admit, is a form of Dark Immortality I was previously unaware of. Just to be cautious, I have ordered Hagrid to dispose of his flock. Perhaps the Dark Colonel's influence will not be able to reach us here, so long as there are no chickens upon the grounds."

"A wise precaution, Albus," McGonagall agreed, before allowing, "Although we may miss the eggs."

"I shall have them shipped to us every morning in time for breakfast," her superior of long years allowed, comfortingly. "I feel sure that, so long as they remain unhatched, they should expose us to no danger. After all, it is the chicken, and not the egg, that we must fear."

"Very comforting, I'm sure." Minerva chose not to speak of doubts of what if her mentor was wrong. "Has Severus made any progress on identifying the poison?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. He has come to me, revealing eleven herbs and spices, but cannot, even with all his experience, explain the secret of why they had such a profound effect upon me, even in combination. He is working on that mystery, even as we speak."

And, indeed, many of the Slytherin students walking past Snape's office on their way to the Great Hall felt strange emotions as they inhaled prevailing fumes emitting from under the crack of his door and, upon reaching their destination, attacked their breakfasts with unusual hunger.

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Harry successfully fought down a smirk on seeing the red/purple lines on the Headmaster's arm as he sat at breakfast.

While Dumbledore had survived the experience of the chicken bone stabbing, rather inevitable given where he'd been when it happened, there remained several dark purple marks around the wound, representing buried slivers of chicken bone that had wormed their way out from the immediate injury, steadily working their way into the rest of his body.

Dark curses on those slivers made them resistant to most magic in a very dastardly way - they would simply explode if spells were cast on them, or if magic got too close, like potions being drunk and assimilated by the body or the arm with those slivers in it being used to cast a spell. And the explosion ought to be quite sufficient to blow off the Headmaster's arm.

He could check in with a muggle surgeon to get those removed straight away, but somehow Harry knew that Dumbledore wouldn't do that, if on the remote chance it did get suggested to him.

Wizards regarded muggle medicine with some amount of horror, just like most muggles regarded the leech and snake-oil wielding quacks of centuries gone by. They were not only certain that it couldn't possibly offer benefit to them, but they found it more than a bit

disturbing, relying as it did on a concept they found revolting: Being cut apart and sewn back together like a garment.

It also made no sense to them, like if you'd gone in to see a doctor about an earache and the solution he proposed was to cut off your leg.

No, wizards saw muggle doctors as the most dangerously deranged sort of quacks imaginable. And, to be fair, muggle surgeons did a fair amount of cutting off of body parts to treat things wizards could cure with a simple potion (cancer surgery was one example). But there was an extra, added element of risk to it, as accidental magic was extremely possible, even for mature wizards, when their bodies were undergoing great stresses - like from being cut open and someone reaching in to manipulate their insides.

It didn't take much of a spark of magic to ignite dangerous gasses used to anesthetize surgical patients. So surgery for wizards almost guaranteed an explosion. So there was a fair amount of honest and respectable truth to the basis of their fear of muggle medicine.

So, unless the Headmaster wanted to lose an arm, he ought to be avoiding much magic use for a while.

That ought to be a significant benefit to anyone wanting to avoid him. It did not, could not, shut him down entirely, as he still possessed great influence, but it did offer a nice amount of help to people like Harry.

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The other ideal thing about having his own house elf, Harry felt, was the opportunities for smuggling that it opened up.

He knew with absolute certainty that the Headmaster was watching his mail. There was no doubt of that. Harry had checked out the mail wards over him himself, and everything they didn't block entirely got routed to Dumbledore for screening. It was not possible for him to

receive any mail that the Dark Ravenclaw hadn't seen and approved of first.

Part of that was information, mostly it was a control. Stop the boy from getting in contact with anyone the Headmaster hadn't personally selected, and all of that. Keep him isolated and alone and he'll stay reliant on you.

There were also wards in plenty around the Hogwarts property, and only a few of those had to do with protecting the place. Most of the castle's actual defenses were presently inactive (which was the only way to explain all of the villains that got on the place over and over and over again!). No, mostly the wards had been converted over into a vast information net, and one of the things they monitored most carefully was who came in and went out.

However, Hogwarts did not grow its own food. Those greenhouses were for other purposes, teaching classes and creating potions ingredients, and so on. So, by having Dobby leave as part of the grocery pickup crew every morning, and pick up some actual groceries before coming back, Harry could send or deliver packages through his personal house elf, and it came under one of the few blind spots in the information network.

Albus did track house elves, but there was such a large body of information there that he couldn't possibly recover data from that unless he was looking hard at just the right place, and so far Dobby was just another elf leaving in the morning as part of the grocery pickup crew. Totally unremarkable. It had been one of Dobby's assignments before Harry had bonded him.

So, through Dobby, Harry was now able to get packages in and out.

"Thank you, Dobby." Harry accepted the latest package. "Is there anything I can do to reward you for this?" he asked curiously.

"Dobby is so grateful to serve Harry Potter, sir!" The elf's eyes shone. "And now Harry Potter sir wants to reward him? Harry Potter sir is the kindest wizard ever!"

The elf suddenly tensed and vanished, just as Hermione came into the little alcove that Harry had been receiving his clandestine merchandise in. She came in, nervously looking over her shoulder. "Harry! It's only our second day and that's the third time we've seen Filch since breakfast! It's like he's hovering around, watching us!"

"Pay it no mind, Hermione. He's probably hoping to catch us going to a broom closet, so he can give us detentions." Harry answered with a grin.

Hermione blushed, noticing they were in an out-of-the-way place already, one that couples might use for snogging.

Then she noticed the box in his arms. "What are you doing with that?"

Harry stood up, straightening even as he levitated the box to check out what was inside. "Oh, just plotting to improve the education at Hogwarts, that's all."

"Improve it in what way?" the girl inquired suspiciously.

Harry gave her a delightfully unconcerned shrug. "Well, you know how bad Muggle Studies is. Honestly! Who hires a pureblood to teach a course on muggles? Do you think she's ever even met one?"

Hermione sucked in her bottom lip. "To be fair, we've only had one class with her."

"One was quite enough," Harry answered, looking down at a list he'd drawn from the box and beaming. "So I ordered some supplementary materials so we could make a club. That might help our classmates more than the class."

"What is it you've got?" Hermione stepped closer to peer in the box.

Harry withdrew a large metal disk. "Film reels. The picture plays so long as the reel is spinning and a light is shining through it. There are plenty of magic lights we can use, and if not there are muggle ones that do not use 'lekticky'. And I was just looking up a book on Charms

that could help us play the music and dialog soundtrack as well. Magically, of course."

Hermione frowned at his mispronunciation of "Electricity", but as it was the same one their Muggle Studies Professor had used, she could not complain out loud. But she swiftly got over that in her budding excitement. "Really? That's marvelous! What have you got?"

Harry gave a deprecating shrug. "Well, I didn't have a great deal of control over what I got. Most people get their movies on tape or disk, actual reels of 35mm film are only used by theaters, and not many of them anymore. So I just had an agent go looking, and buy what was available."

That dimmed her excitement somewhat. "So what did you get?" she repeated.

Harry shot her a delighted grin. "Mostly old TV shows my agent picked up at the estate sale of a collector."

"What show?" she asked.

"Star Trek, the original series," he answered.

Hermione grinned. "That's one of my father's favorite series. I grew up on it, and wouldn't mind seeing all the episodes again. Besides, it ought to at least grant the students here an idea of what the muggles use for entertainment. That's something, isn't it?"

"Oh, absolutely!" he agreed emphatically, still flipping through the box. "But there are some other things in here that ought to be useful. Actually, this one would make for a perfect prank."

He withdrew one reel and looked at it.

"Oh? Let me see." Hermione pushed forward to examine it.

"Only if you agree to listen to my plan." Harry hid the film can behind him.

|||

The class of first-year Ravenclaws pushed into the room, waiting for their History Professor to show up for their very first class. Most of them knew not to expect much from the old ghost, and a few were even bold enough to start setting out other projects to work on while the old ghost droned on. And the few who did not know from having overheard before learned that in whispers now, while a few were clustering in the best napping seats.

"Hey, why are there shells on the walls?" one of them asked, only to be answered by a pureblood.

"Shells can be easily enchanted to record and play back sounds. My guess is they've got a speech from an old Minister of Magic they want us to listen to."

Some of the students perked up in more interest. The older years had made this class sound more boring than that. That could actually be useful.

Moaning Myrtle then chose that moment to float in through the chalkboard, having been enlisted by Harry for this prank. The real Professor Binns was trapped inside of a ghost ward placed on the armchair he'd died in, so would be missing this class.

So she was there impersonating him.

The class, some of whom knew their teacher was a ghost (and none in this particular batch knew wasn't a girl - Professor was a gender-neutral title) sat down at their desks, awaiting what this 'Professor Binns' would say.

"Good morning, class," Myrtle gave all a nod of acknowledgement. "First I will take roll, then we will get right to one of the most pivotal events in magical history. I expect three feet of parchment from each of you on how you feel the events you are to witness shaped the world we live in. Any questions?" she asked, prompting some shaking of heads, so she looked at an attendance record laid out by elves that Binns always ignored. "Sara Ashley?"

"Present."

Myrtle actually did a far better impersonation of a professor than Binns did, so it was only a moment before attendance was called. Two Ravenclaws were absent, having felt from rumors they'd overheard their time would have been better spent in the library researching. Myrtle informed their classmates, "I will not take points this time. Inform them they can make up the class with the Gryffindors or Slytherins. And see that it does not happen again."

She got respectful and obedient "Yes, ma'am's."

Then the lights dimmed, and a vague sort of nebulous singing came out from the conch shells attached to the walls. In the newly blackened atmosphere, the ghost at the head of the room shone out like a light bulb.

"Now pay close attention," Myrtle informed them. "I shall be watching you for any misbehavior from the back of the room."

Then she dimmed herself and took up position. But very quickly Myrtle got caught up herself, and soon wasn't paying attention to anything but the film.

A voice spoke out in a strange language, that was fortunately translated by another voice in English and in text at the bottom of the blank wall being used as a screen. Filled with dramatic pauses, it said, "The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was, is lost, for none now live who remember it."

A title then swam into view, proclaiming this to be the story of "The Lord of The Rings."

And the class sat in rapt attention as the story got told of the forging of the Great Rings of Power, unfolding into the tale of the Dark Lord Sauron, who forged in secret a master ring to control all others.

No one moved, people barely breathed as the students watched armies clash and heroes fall in full stereophonic sound, and thus began the unfolding story as it developed into one of the greatest tales of all time.

Unfortunately for them, they thought they were sitting in a history class.

|||

"I can't believe you got me to go along with that." Hermione blushed, still wondering over that turn of conversation. But he'd made each step sound so reasonable and follow so closely on the heels of the others!

She was standing beside him as he was sliding large, leatherbound copies of 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of The Rings' onto a history shelf of the Hogwarts library, the books already marked as if part of the school's collection.

"It was 'For The Greater Good'," Harry joked, barely holding onto a straight face as he did so.

"You don't honestly expect someone to fall for that cheesy line, do you?" Hermione gave him a beady eye, unbelieving.

Harry couldn't help it, and broke down laughing.

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"Professor McGonagall, may I speak with you for a few minutes?" Luna asked.

"You may Ms. Lovegood," Minerva replied.

"Then can I? I don't have a mummy any longer and I needed some womanly advice."

"Have a seat," Minerva sighed. Why in the nine hells did Lovegood have to come to her for help? "What do you need?"

"Well," Luna began. "I was hoping that you could give me an idea of how I could get Harry to notice me."

"Is that all," Minerva giggled. It was nice to see the Lovegood girl wasn't so odd after all.

"Uh huh," Luna agreed. "I just want him to corner me in an empty classroom, grab me roughly, and tell me that I'm his woman."

"Urk." Or not.

"Then he'll break me to his will," Luna continued. "At first I'll try to resist but he'll be too strong for me and so it will go until finally, out of breath I'll accept him as my one true master."

"I see, um I..."

"And then after he's sure of my loyalty," Luna giggled. "Harry will send me out to gather more girls to sate his dark lusts, one by one I'll lure my friends to meet their fate." Luna's knees rubbed together. "They'll be defiant at first, but Harry will order me to break them."

"That's very interesting but..."

"In the end, Harry will take them over and over but he'll never be satisfied. He'll keep sending me out until all the attractive girls are his. Ohhh it will be so romantic."

"I... if you'll excuse me Ms. Lovegood, I have some things I need to discuss with my coworkers."

"Ok," Luna chirped. She was ever so happy that Professor McGonagall was going to go get a second opinion to help her win Harry's heart, such a dedicated educator.

After all, until her Uncle Lucy was dead, certain appearances had to be maintained! And, to be quite frank, in order to compensate for Harry's blunder, she had to appear even more odd than usual.

Besides, it never hurt to set the groundwork for things to come. And she couldn't just marry him out of the blue, now could she?

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Author's Notes:

Not much to say really. Except I find myself a touch confused.

My reviews seem to have missed the difference between minions and friends. They seem to think having toadies to do your bidding makes you a Hufflepuff.

People you are willing to sacrifice for trivial reasons do not count as friends.

Chapter Nine

by Lionheart

|||

Harry was gazing fondly at line of slender new potion bottles, filled with an array of differently colored contents, secure in their unbreakable bottles, and glistening from the wash he'd just put them through.

The fixatives he'd added should make those batches stable for years, and the wash meant that no trace of the contents ought to remain on the outside of the bottles, which made them safe to carry.

Harry had a potion bandoleer as part of his safari kit. Somehow the British wizards had worked out what a nice idea it was to have a collection of useful potions right on hand for when you might need one. Of course, they applied this knowledge only to a specialty niche market, but he was glad they had, as now he didn't have to devise his own equipment for doing the same. He could use the gear they'd already produced and presumably tested.

And Polyjuice, healing potions, Veritaserum... every potion you could carry expanded your options of what you were capable of during an emergency.

Of course, that wasn't the only use they could be put to, as he'd spotted Fred and George getting far more use out of the knowledge in that 'Basics of Brewing' book than Ron could even imagine. And, thinking ahead, Harry had gifted those two pranking prodigies with a new potion setup identical to his own: a Portable Lab, advanced self-stirring rods and measuring tools, silver cauldrons and copies of a few potions books Hogwarts kept in the Restricted Section, the whole nine yards.

The duo had been flabbergasted, floored by their gratitude.

In return for this, relatively minor (for him) investment, he got to sign on as a junior partner in their future prank-shop business. Not a big deal on the face of it, as his skills suited him to much better paying

work. However, the real payout came not in money later, but in priceless knowledge in the here and now, where he got to be enlisted in the mixing and brewing department.

Those twins were geniuses. They really were. They'd already broken half a dozen standard and accepted rules of magic, and were on their way toward breaking many more.

That was the sort of knowledge you couldn't buy! It was his privilege now, as their assistant, to be learning all that they'd discovered - and that was no small deal!

Just about everything those two brilliant redheads came up with was stuff Voldemort didn't know. Stuff nobody else knew! And he wasn't going to learn it in any book, as they'd never written any of it down (except in private notes only they knew how to read).

This was new magic, not the old stuff done over in a different guise. It was a privilege to learn it in any capacity, and the price of the equipment meant nothing contrasted with the value of what that tuition was worth!

Already, Harry'd revealed far more of his store of stolen knowledge to them than he had to anyone else, just to serve as a sounding board to the twins, so they could bounce ideas off of him and get answers swiftly instead of using their valuable time looking up obscure topics in dusty corners of the library. And, having made it available to them thusly, the duo were already improving on Voldemort's knowledge, expanding it in new directions!

He'd left the Weasley twins contemplating possibilities granted by a handful of kneazel hairs Harry had combed out of his pet's coat that morning, and the kind of things they were suggesting as potential uses were so exciting that Harry was contemplating buying his own magical menagerie, just to see what they'd do with the ingredients they could harvest.

Actually, Harry was considering negotiation a deal with the twins where Harry could get both Hermione and Luna added on as junior brewers, both for the knowledge and experience it would yield to the

duo of young girls, but also to free up those pair of pranking minds from ordinary drudgery so they could be devoting those remarkable intellects of theirs to devising more stuff!

The abused child was already contemplating a bid, starting with an offer of Occlumency books and training, then moving on to a second set of potions brewing equipment identical to the first, and, if it came to that, going on to buying a storefront in Diagon Alley for them, when a white form fluttered into his face, and settled on his shoulder.

"Hey, Hedwig. How are you girl?" Harry accepted his owl's attentions and removed the letter from her leg without hardly thinking. The owl paused, as if unsure she should let him, but in the end gave no fuss and let him go ahead and remove it.

On opening the letter, his brain kicked into gear and reminded him why his owl ought to have been reluctant to part with it. The letter wasn't for him! He'd been so busy thinking of other things (namely all the stuff Voldemort didn't know that he was learning from the twins) that he'd momentarily forgotten that he'd left Hedwig with the Grangers for the school year, and this was a letter from them to her. Private family correspondence.

However, by the time he'd remembered that, he'd already read the first line and was shocked enough to abandon good manners and continue reading.

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"Harry, what's the matter?"

The boy looked up at her from where he'd been sitting on her bed, waiting for her to get back. He was pale and wan. "You know, it never occurred to me that normal parents would be upset and the kind of things that go on here."

He held out to her a letter in her father's distinctive handwriting. It was open, and he must've read it.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione sympathized. "I'd never wanted to include you in my troubles! You've got enough to deal with as it is! Besides, you shouldn't worry. I asked McGonagall about it in our first year, and they can't do a thing about it! There's a new law on the books that makes it illegal to prevent a student from receiving a magical education if they have the ability. So even though they throw a fuss, they can't stop me from coming."

Harry nodded, still looking a bit pale and sickly. Taking back the letter she hadn't accepted, he perused it once again. "You know," he mused. "They do have a point. You were almost killed in First Year, almost killed in Second, almost killed in Third - on the train ride in no less! It never struck me before, but this kind of thing has to be driving your parents mad with concern over you. I know I would be in their place."

Hermione plopped down into a seat beside him on the bed, swishing hair out of her eyes. "I know. They tried to have me withdrawn from Hogwarts after the troll incident in our First Year. I was able to convince them that the school was safe again, because the teacher who'd caused all the trouble had been 'arrested' (which I thought was better than telling them that my best friend had killed him). After I got petrified in our Second Year, though, it was very obvious that the school wasn't safe at all. My parents had a great deal to say on the matter, involving words they don't usually use. But muggle parents or guardians can't withdraw any child from Hogwarts without consent from the child, or the school, or some Wizarding authority, like the Ministry, or the Hogwarts Board of Governors."

Harry turned a sickly face on her, one hand lifting the letter. "So they keep pleading with you to give it up?"

Hermione nodded, then explained desperately. "But I can't, Harry! Surely you know that! It may be dangerous, but all of those things are over so quickly, and really it's a fluke of bad luck they keep happening anyway! I can't give up my friends or learning magic! There's just too much here I have to do! I want to learn it all, don't you understand?"

The boy nodded, his color returning, and he sat a trifle taller as he came to a decision. "Yes, I can understand all of that. But your parents have a point, too. This place has been ridiculously dangerous, for all of us."

Now it was Hermione's turn to look pale, and she swept an escaped lock of hair back out of her face, looking desperately afraid. "Harry, you don't mean I should agree to let them pull me out of Hogwarts, do you? We can't afford a tutor! My magical education will stop, except for what I learn out of books! And, in spite of what I often say, you can't learn everything that way!"

"Hold on a minute," Harry held up a placating hand. "Firstly, no I don't think you should stop getting a formal magical education. However, Hogwarts may not be the best - it's certainly not the safest! So, why don't you owl your parents with a reply, asking only that they look into other institutes of magic that you can transfer to, hm? That way, we get all of the facts together and have more data to base a decision off of, okay? I can see how it could make your parents feel better to be able to look into other options, thinking about getting you out of danger, and... it may just be there is another school you'd like better. Considering some of the teachers we've got around here, like Trelawney and Snape, SOMEBODY has to have a better program, right?"

Hermione was still very pale and uncomfortable. "Harry... I wouldn't know anyone in those new places..."

He laughed and gave her a hug. "Oh! Is THAT what you're worried about? Then don't! I can already guarantee that wherever you're going, I'd be interested to follow! And I can't see many schools closing their doors to the Boy-Whose-Name-Must-Be-Hyphenated, can you?"

"Oh Harry!" she hugged him strongly back, then bounced off her seat to go write her parents that letter, snatching theirs on her way so she could give answers to their specific questions and concerns.

Harry smiled, seeing her settle down into the main chair at his desk like she owned it. He'd been correct to get the one with extra drawers. This way he still had one to himself!

Although it was a thin drawer.

Amused, Harry stood and went over to his bookshelves, already crammed with reading material of every kind, including almost as many books out of Hermione's collection as he'd been able to procure himself! The boy stood still and focused for a moment, before beginning decisive waves of his wand.

Harry's travel furniture was actually fairly cheap by the standards of the wizarding world. Unless you were talking about something truly exotic, the materials something was made out of almost didn't matter to them, so the softly polished wood was effectively dross.

No, the real cost was in the spells put on an item, and his had been the most basic models on the shelves: shrinking and enlarging, basic safety charms for the contents, and that was it.

And, well, if his best friend was going to be taking up all of the space in them with her own stuff, it was time they got more space!

He began weaving charms and enchantments that would expand the powers of his magical furniture, most especially adding on space enhancement and self cataloging charms. Soon, each of those bookcases would be able to hold what fifty could without those expansion charms.

They'd still end up filling those up, of course. The Hogwarts library itself took up more volume than that. So, in the end, Harry would go and buy another few here and there until he had a good dozen of those bookcases, bought cheap and with most of the charm work done by himself.

Hermione insisted on watching him do the spells the second time he did them, of course. It wasn't like she'd failed to notice when their shared bookcases suddenly held a great deal more internal volume than they had before!

Soon she'd be casting those same charms on the pockets of her robes, and pulling out entire dictionaries she'd put in there.

The security charms and privacy wards he added were another matter. He could not allow another to pluck those secrets out of her mind via legilimency so he simply hadn't told her about them. She was keyed to bypass them, so they ought to be totally transparent to her, unless she was under Imperious or otherwise compromised, in which case she'd be treated like everyone else, and completely unable to find those bookcases at all.

That was one small advantage he had over Voldemort. Fidelius had the same root word as Fidelity, and that root meant 'To Trust.'

The Fidelius was a charm that required not just magical skill and power, but an intense degree of trust that virtually any Dark Wizard was incapable of. It was a bit like the Unforgivables that way - you had to really mean it, feel the emotion behind it strongly, before you could cast it.

Voldemort would not, **COULD** not, trust anyone! He was sadly incapable of any degree of it! People project their own feelings and motivations onto others, and Tom Riddle Jr. knew he would betray anybody, so at his root he imagined anyone else was capable of the same, and watched them constantly, waiting for such a betrayal.

While, intellectually, Voldemort could recognize that some were more likely to betray than others, he felt those too innocent to betray were fools, and fools could not be trusted either! They might do anything, for any reason!

He could not feel the least flicker of real trust, certainly nothing approaching the levels of absolute purity required for a Fidelius charm.

However, ironically, it was Voldemort's skill at breaking wards that allowed Harry to add his own few wrinkles to that charm, and intensify the security that offered enormously by adding filters and escape clauses. So Hermione knew the secret, and could see the bookcases,

but would forget it under conditions where she was not in control of herself.

There was no provision there against willful betrayal, of course. There could not be, it was a charm based on trust, after all. And protective wards, much like immortality rituals, must always have their loopholes. It was required by the nature of magic itself - nothing less than divine could be perfect.

And it took only the slightest degree of knowledge about mythology to know that perfection eluded most so-called gods, as well.

Still, that didn't prevent Harry from trying to reach closer to it than others.

So, his bookcase-Fidelius, like Tom's immortality rituals, had many layers of other wards backing it up, each one covering holes in the defenses left by others. Only a fool puts all his eggs in one basket, after all.

That done, Harry moved on, emplacing those same combinations of wards over the rest of his furniture. The Dark Ravenclaw was an information addict after all, and Harry couldn't put it past him to rifle through his personal belongings searching for clues.

In fact, it was almost guaranteed. The only question was how many times it'd happened, and whether it was Albus personally, or his agents (school House Elves, most likely) doing the searching for him!

On that thought, Harry put those same wards over his bed. Then he went an extra step further and added a four-poster canopy to it, like the other beds at Hogwarts. But this was there for another reason than to look pretty and trap heat in a drafty old castle. No, Harry put on some charms, along with a base of moke oil and kneazel whisker dust (Augustus had shed a whisker the other day, and Harry had saved it) blended and laminated onto the very wood, so in the presence of any stranger or untrustworthy person (and especially in the presence of an untrustworthy stranger) the bed would clam up.

Specifically, the four posters would shrink and the canopy would come down almost instantly, while the outside of the bed would transform into 'hiding mode', where it would appear to be a simple pool table, already set up for a game.

Anybody, even the most powerful wizard, was more vulnerable asleep than awake. So this was a valuable precaution. And Harry worked those same space enhancement charms upon this article of furniture, as he had on the others (including the desk drawers, so maybe he could have some space in those for himself, now) so even clammed up he'd have a very comfortable internal volume inside of the sealed-off bed.

He also gave himself a set of mirrors, to see out of the bed while he was protected within, and also secret, carefully warded hatches opening onto escape tunnels that were actually the ball chutes that the pool table had built within itself so it could play the game.

Because no matter how perfect your defense, and he intended to ward this as thickly as the Hogwarts castle walls, you always had to have an escape route for in case things got really bad.

One final charm he added to his travel furniture was a self-transfiguration that could be triggered at a distance by a spell he invented, that could only be cast effectively by the secret-keeper for his furniture-Fidelius. It would transform this whole set into small birds, of a type he could set at the time of casting, that would immediately move to evade pursuit and rejoin him.

No need to go leaving his luggage behind if he had to escape someone in a rush.

Laughing, the boy then went to join Hermione in her studies, coming as he did so to a realization.

What happiness he had in life all came from Hermione.

He'd have to do something about his arrangement with Luna. It was no longer in his best interests. There was no point to winning a war if you sacrificed all that gave life meaning to get there.

|||

Potions class was next on the agenda.

Naturally, Snape hadn't been removed from his post. That was not surprising as Harry had already pegged Dumbledore's argument style. He'd agree when you had him bent backwards over a barrel, but then he'd delay and delay and come up with excuse after excuse until finally he was forced to sadly inform you that despite all of his best efforts, he was unable to comply.

In other words, he lied and cheated. No effort would ever be made to remove Snape from his position.

There was no point in bargaining with someone who had no intention of filling his part of any deal. So Harry considered himself free, from the moment he entered that class, to disregard any pretense of obeying Dumbledore.

And, naturally, the old fart must have informed his pet Death Eater as to Harry's attempt to get the overblown bully removed, because the greasy haired creature swept into the Potions classroom intent on Harry Potter and with murderous rage within his eyes.

His classmates shrank back as Snape made no pretense of going to the front of the room and instead made a beeline for the corner where Harry sat near the side. His voice seethed with venom as he spoke.

"Potter! I..."

The class gaped with confusion as their fraudulent Potions Professor (they never learned anything from him - more like DESPITE him! So he could lay no claim on being an actual teacher) first paused, then shifted from murderous rage to a look of horror, and then grasped his face and started screaming.

Harry vigorously maintained a look of guarded confusion, in spite of the great effort it took to do so. Inside he was rejoicing. Snape had made a legilimency attack on him, covered with the first moments of

speaking, and splitting his attentions between speaking and attacking like that had cost him.

Harry could have done this to him anyway. Voldemort was better at the mind arts than Snape was, and there was the added advantage of the Dark Mark stripping away all of a Death Eater's defenses to one who knew its secrets. However, it was so much more satisfying to take him like this without a struggle, and return some of his bullying in kind.

Being able to take over someone's mind put you in possession of the control room, so to speak. Everything was there, and if you had access to that there was very little you couldn't do to them.

Harry had grabbed ahold of Snape's probe and slammed it into Harry's well of hatred, disgust, shame and revulsion locked inside of his deep subconscious as leftovers from all of the Dursleys treatment of him. Having submerged his attacker into those feelings, he'd then slammed the door on him, trapping the Professor inside, where he could not get out, but had to live through those emotions in an endless, unendurable cycle.

That got Snape to screaming.

Then it was time to get creative.

Harry followed the trace back, penetrated Snape's mind, which was now far too busy processing the unending stream of emotions he'd tapped into to even notice or care about Harry's probe. Once inside, he deactivated Snape's emotional defenses, unplugged his rational mind, and magnified the effects of the emotions he was downloading a thousandfold.

In the real world, Snape's volume tripled and rose into the high registers. He stumbled back, knocking over desks and tables, now no longer grabbing at his face but actively clawing out his own eyes.

But Harry didn't let him go.

Blood was pouring down Snape's cheeks and his voice broke on the high pitched shriek he was trying to maintain, but Harry wasn't nearly finished. He broke open the back of Snape's own mind and retrieved those memories he had of times Lord Voldemort had placed him under Cruciatus. Harry didn't give him one of those, he put them ALL into active replay, so his professor got to relive those experiences as traumatic flashbacks, all at once.

His mind snapped, but still Harry didn't let go.

Snape's fingers had burst out his eyes and clawed deep inside of the sockets seeking a way to cut the probe and end the pain. He wheezed and choked, unable to breathe as his lungs had run out of oxygen and was unable to get any more. Harry hit a command for his diaphragm to force the man to inhale, and once again the shriek resumed again and shattered his voice as the man stumbled back into the teacher's desk, which was too large to shove out of the way of his wildly plunging body.

Harry modulated his own expression from guarded confusion to puzzled concern as he redoubled the assault, breaking open the vaults where Snape kept his own doubts and insecurities, letting all of those loose to ravage what was left of the man's mind.

Out in the real world, the Potions Professor began slamming his forehead against his desk with the full weight of his body. Gripped by madness and unendurable agony out of several sources, he wildly began bucking back and forth, swinging his whole body in repeated blows of his head against that desk as if he were an axe and that beak-like nose of his the blade, trying instinctively to blot out consciousness and end the pain.

Harry had been keeping a vice-like grip on the man's magic, so it could not subdue him or deaden the pain. Now he let it go, all in one directed burst, and Snape stood up, screamed again despite the ragged condition of his vocal chords, and, before an entire audience of horrified students, his head exploded, showering the front of the room with blood and gore, even as his headless body toppled and fell with dead, meaty 'thunk' upon the floor.

Harry wandlessly cast a minor shielding charm so the students would not be put through the horror of being splattered with that man's remains. Then he cast a few charms wandlessly and under the desk, so Dumbledore couldn't see them in his inevitable pensieve review of this moment, taken from some student's memories. The charms he used were ones used on Auror recruits to shelter their minds from the horrors of war, aiding them in dealing with having first seen death.

It was only polite, after all. The kids were not his enemy.

Now see if Dumbledore could still keep Snape in this position! Actually, Harry frowned, thinking that he now owed Bella an apology for having stolen her kill.

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Author's Notes:

Again, it's one of those cliches. It happens in every fic in the genre. Harry puts his foot down and gives a warning, telling someone to stop their criminal behavior towards him, and that warning is ALWAYS ignored!!

What does Harry do? He takes it, or gives another warning.

Not this time.

Chapter Ten

by Lionheart

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Albus Dumbledore began to feel distress over something he'd observed and went to discuss it with McGonagall, who he felt could have useful insight, as she often passed on little tidbits the students had trusted her with.

Harry had, if anything, underestimated how much and how thoroughly the Headmaster had rigged the castle to be an information network. Albus had every ghost and painting spy for him, naturally, and all the staff as well. The elves reported everything to him, as did the castle's wards, and as if that were not enough he frequently roamed the halls invisibly himself, observing directly what was of the most direct and pertinent interest to him.

Dumbledore had never heard of the muggle game called Paranoia, about a dark, dystopian future where a fanatical and insane computer spied upon its human charges so thoroughly that every time they visited a toilet not only were they watched on camera, but what came out of them was carefully weighed, measured and tested as a matter of routine.

However, Albus had that 'Friend Computer' beat three ways. For one thing, the city it ruled over was in a state of terrible disrepair that created the odd blind spots, while Hogwarts was in peak condition, functioning perfectly. And he was at the nerve center for everything.

His agents, the elves, ghosts and teachers, not to mention prefects and certain students, could give their reports to paintings and Albus would hear it as though they were spoken to himself. He heard and saw what any of the portraits in the castle did, and so could almost literally be said to see and hear everything that went on inside of Hogwarts.

It almost made him feel like a god, at times, knowing that much.

No ordinary mind could possibly have processed the information load that he demanded, but where Voldemort, the Dark Slytherin, had performed rituals to grant him power, Albus Dumbledore had, true to Harry's assessment of him as a Dark Ravenclaw, performed his to increase his ability to handle and process raw information.

Every painting was his eyes, every ghost his ears, and each suit of armor his hands, if he should choose to use them. In his castle Albus felt invincible, invulnerable, and, yes, frequently invisible as well, being seen only when he chose to be so.

No spider knew more about its web than he did about Hogwarts. Within his lair his knowledge was so near absolute that he could extrapolate from what he'd learned within to know the majority of useful happenings outside the school as well, from conversations and other things overheard or seen.

Surely no creature was half as worthy as he to control the little ants that were the rest of the wizarding world. None among them could claim even half of his knowledge, not even a hundredth part of it! He knew things so far in advance of their actual happening, from small signs observed and then extrapolated forward through his more than a century of experience, that if he wished he could easily have himself passed off as a seer.

But that could cause those little ants to busy themselves trying to extract nuggets of that knowledge from him for their own benefit, and that simply wouldn't do! They were his to command, not in any position to require favors.

Besides, he preferred not to share knowledge of any sort, as the more his ants knew, the more complicated they made things, and the more trouble they were to manipulate 'For The Greater Good.'

He'd never quite completed that phrase out in public. People always imagined the tag line 'for the greater good of the world', or 'society in general', but every time he spoke it he completed it in the privacy of his own mind the way he actually meant it, 'for the greater good of Albus Dumbledore.'

It really was only fair. To his mind, the rest of wizard-kind were nothing more than bugs, deserving of pity perhaps, for not being as magnificent as he, but certainly no empathy.

Those who distrusted him frequently suspected his lemon drops were laced with potions. In that, they were correct, but it was less to control his staff and students than it was to contain himself. For over a century he'd needed regular doses of the potions and charms laden within them to maintain that grandfatherly air he was so famous for, and not go into cackling displays of narcissism out in public and tell people what he really thought of them.

No, that wouldn't do his reputation any good at all.

Dumbledore was a monster, incapable of feeling pity, compassion or remorse. However, through a cocktail of potions including a special draught of cheering charms, he was perfectly able to fake the image of a kindly grandfather.

Thus, he encouraged the blind fools and students to trust him, as even his foes counted him as a dottering old fool, and mostly harmless. It was really one of his most brilliant ideas, and he'd had it so long ago.

More the fools they, but everyone (outside himself) was so easily deceived!

However, every so often one of his schemes began to go not completely right and had to be corrected for, and he feared one of those times was upon him right now.

Blast that boy! He should never have surrendered the Potter invisibility cloak to him! But the boy had been so meek and pliable back then, and he'd needed to know if it had any powers usable only by one with the Potter bloodline.

But this year the infernal brat had taken to wearing it often, and that made him distressingly hard to track. None of his paintings, and few of his staff or ghosts, could sense the invisible with any reliability.

Why must the boy complicate things? All Harry had to do was suffer and die according to a schedule Albus had arranged. Then everything would be fine!

"Minerva," Albus entered his deputy's office with a slight knock on her door. "I was just getting back to my duties after my convalescence, and have only just overheard a most distressing rumor that I hope you could lay to rest. Is it true that Harry and Miss Granger are seeing each other in a romantic sense? I'd previously understood they were just study partners."

McGonagall looked up from reading a copy of Teen Witch Weekly she'd confiscated earlier that day, and, blushing slightly, hid it under her desk while Albus pretended not to notice.

She smiled for him. "Oh, Albus, Miss Granger explained that to me yesterday. No, they are not seeing each other. That was an excuse. Harry thought it up so they would not seem suspicious slipping off together to use their Time Turners to visit their extra classes. I thought it was really quite ingenious, actually, and awarded them twenty points for their original thinking."

Dumbledore's face had gone grave. "I wish you had brought this to me earlier, Minerva."

Sliding her purloined magazine discretely into a drawer, Minerva looked up to him, puzzled, "But Albus, whatever could be the matter? They are doing well in all of their classes, and behaving responsibly with the items entrusted to them. They were even quite imaginative in finding an excuse that no one could question. I should think you'd be pleased with them."

Inwardly, Dumbledore was seething. However, as always the potions overrode his natural urges to curse and rave over their disobedience, and he answered his deputy in soft and kindly tones. "Ah, Minerva. No, that is not my concern. What frightens me is the possibility of their ruse becoming real. Affection, except in the rarest cases, cannot be faked for long before it rises in truth."

Albus himself was, he knew, one of those rare exceptions. Tom Riddle another.

McGonagall was shaking her head. "I still fail to see the trouble, Albus. What should it matter that two friends may eventually marry? They rather remind me of James and Lily. To be honest, I am rather looking forward to them discovering affection for each other."

Albus shook his head gravely. "But Minerva, I fear you fail to understand the extent to which they are already taking it. Hogwarts informs me they are already sharing a set of rooms together."

"And Miss Granger explained that as well, Albus," Minerva took out a stack of homework and put on her reading glasses. "She repeated an argument Harry had given her, in which he pointed out that to compensate for the extra time they are working, they must also catch a proportionate amount of extra sleep and down time, which out of necessity they must take away from the regular dormitories. I found her logic reasonable, and agreed with them both on their decision. She invited me to look over their rooms, a set of former VIP quarters near the greenhouses, and I placed a set of protective charms around her suite identical to the charms warding the girls dormitories. Really, Albus, I've rarely met a pair of third years so responsible, and fail to see what you are making yourself so upset over."

Then his Deputy Headmistress began reading homework, her way of telling him she did not agree with him, and effectively closing their little interview.

It was rare she was so bold. Something would have to be done to humble her.

The Headmaster could see where this was going, and nodded, speaking in sad tones, "I do hope your trust in them is not displaced, Minerva."

Then he left, smirking inside as she glanced up in apprehension.

There, a seed of doubt had been planted. Now, whatever catastrophe he arranged to break up the budding relationship could also be used

to bolster his deputy's trust in him, as she'd see that he'd been right all along. He'd done this enough times that it was rare anymore than she showed signs of thinking on her own. But it was best to nip that in the bud, as it were.

Blast it!

Harry was far too powerful, but could be kept ignorant so long as he was properly isolated and neglected. That he had saved young Granger's life was unfortunate, as from that day they'd become friends, in spite of all the work done to keep them separate!

The Headmaster reached his office and called for a House Elf to fetch down Trelawney from her tower. The gifts of a seer were unpredictable and vague but the priests at Delphi had long ago perfected magic for prompting their rare skills to be provoked at need.

Spells he naturally knew, was quite accomplished at, actually.

He let her keep a couple of junk prophecies in her head, falsies to distract. The rest had to be erased, for secrecy. It damaged her gift substantially, to have her mind adjusted regularly like that, but Albus wasn't going to pass up any resource so useful as his own pocket seer!

One of the chief vulnerabilities of one able to see the future was an inability to see their own, so the young lady had fallen into his trap nicely, thinking she was merely interviewing at a school for a job to pass on her ability, when nothing could have been further from Dumbledore's mind.

No, he had been consulting with her for years over every important issue, ever since that day he'd granted her an interview right there, in his office at Hogwarts, where he did all of his interviewing.

It had been she who'd warned him in that interview that the child of Lily and James Potter would surpass him, if they were alive to raise it. It had been Trelawney who'd told him that Harry could lead the entire magical world into a golden age of peace and prosperity... something that had to be stopped if Albus wanted to preserve his own power

and position in it, not just because of Harry's star eclipsing Dumbledore's own, but because his manipulations could not survive in such an environment.

She hadn't put it in those words, of course. The interpretation was his own, but what else was he to expect on hearing the greatest wizard of the age was about to be born?

The greatest was HIM! Dumbledore had to remain on top to perform what he did, and could not afford any rivals!

No, she'd proven so useful he'd hired her on the spot. But even so, he hadn't been able to resist planting a trap with her as the bait, and arranged for a second interview down at Hogsmead, in a tavern he knew was frequented by Death Eaters, knowing one of them could be fooled into listening in so that Voldemort would become interested in destroying Dumbledore's rival for him!

Trelawney had been such an eager and able young thing, back then. At times he almost regretted the damage his meddling was doing to her mind and gift, as she was getting increasingly vague over the years. But really, it was for the Greater Good. True Divination was too dangerous a science to be allowed in any hands but his!

After all, who could keep secrets from a seer?

No, Albus relied upon lies and secrets too dearly for anyone to be permitted to see through them. So the magical art of Divination had to disappear, and what better way to discredit it than to have it taught incompetently by a lady whose gift he had very nearly destroyed?

Harry would never know how much of his misery had been caused by Albus trying to avert Trelawney's prophecies concerning him. Things like 'The son of a flower could never bloom if kept in the dark' had caused his ignorance, and other prophecies had led to the Dursleys, and the abuse.

No, the boy could never be allowed to know how much of his misery could be traced directly back to Dumbledore. He would long ago have destroyed the boy himself, save for the fact that she had warned that

the hand that held the weapon to slay him would die of the wound it had dealt him.

Thus, Albus encouraged Voldemort to kill Harry for him. Encouraged, but never ordered, never commanded, never blocked away quite all of the other options, avoiding any possibility of being 'the hand that held the weapon.'

He could point the way, but did not want to be caught holding it himself, not even metaphorically, with 'the weapon' seen as his servant.

Ideally, Snape should have killed the boy already on his own initiative, or the Dursleys before him, but that hadn't happened in spite of Albus having arranged near every opportunity, and now he was being forced to deal with another prophecy, one that involved Harry's recovery.

Albus had been feeling quite confident about his campaign to destroy the boy ever since Trelawney had declared, when Harry was eight years old, that 'only the kiss of death can fully awaken his potential now.'

Well, dead it didn't matter what the blasted rat's potential was, now did it?

Still, every prophecy had loopholes. There were conditions under which Lily's child could be healed. Albus did not know if being healed could also unlock the boy's potential or not, but wasn't willing to take any chances. That was why he'd worked so hard to isolate him from any possible person who might fulfill that prophesied healing.

One of those was a twice golden watcher, who could wash away Harry's wounds with love.

Obscure, as her prophecies were nowadays, but not impenetrable. However a bit troublesome to counter. Ever since Albus had heard it he'd considered the dangers of the boy associating with Gryffindors, as any member of that House could be considered 'once'

golden. Then, of course, the brat had to be sorted into that House, greatly complicating things.

Slytherin would have been so much easier, as with Snape the Head of House it would have been a trivial effort to marginalize and isolate the boy, continuing his program of abuse. Why had the hat disregarded Dumbledore's command?

After that, there were any number of possible ways for his housemates to qualify. Any blonde could be the boy's dreaded cure, as could any number of people with alarming last names, like Goldstein. There was also metaphorical potentials, like 'friendship was golden'.

So Dumbledore had activated his backup agent. Ron was a pure Slytherin, but the hat had sorted him into Gryffindor on his command, putting Ron in with Harry, where the ginger snake could use the trivial contact of having shared a compartment on the train together to be 'friends' with Harry, and by his obnoxious personality, assure that no one else could stand the pair of them!

It had worked out so well, at first, too.

But then that troll incident he'd permitted Quirrel to arrange, hoping it might destroy Harry, had turned against him.

Really, what was he paying Ron for? The boy had befriended Harry on the train, as desired, teased and bullied away all other children that might have tried approaching the Boy-Who-Lived, as required of him. But a part of that plan had backfired, as getting Granger into that mess that nearly killed her had caused her to latch onto the Boy-Who-Lived, and nothing Ronald could do could drive her away! Even despite of years of trying, doing everything that did not stand out too badly, and thus warn Harry of Ron's false friendship.

Dumbledore had spoken to him quite sternly on that failure, as the last thing he wanted was for Harry's power to be matched to Granger's genius, which was why he'd refused to allow Harry to share too many elective classes with her. Only now Albus was being forced to consider another danger she posed.

The name Granger hearkened back to a medieval office, the one charged with watching over the grain stores - and grain was often called the gold you can eat. A watcher of grain, or the dreaded 'watcher of gold'. Being a Gryffindor, that girl, he was sure, accomplished the second so she was almost surely the 'twice golden watcher' he had feared healing Harry.

Dumbledore had wounded Harry for a purpose. If those wounds should be healed, then all of his work to destroy Harry could come to nothing! That could not be permitted, for any number of reasons.

But, while Harry had prophetic protection, the girl did not. It always made such a fuss to have students dropping dead during the school year, not that that had ever prevented him from arranging it in the past, of course. But it was probably time to arrange another of his murder attempts.

And, should it be a suitably dramatic catastrophe, he could again convince Minerva to abandon her dangerous habit of thinking, and return to trusting him absolutely, as she ought.

Dumbledore had to be circumspect when trying to murder Harry, doing things obliquely so he could never be held directly responsible, lest the prophecy of being slain with the same wound come upon him. Tricking the boy to enter death traps was still the boy's choice, after all, and having his teachers set the actual deadly traps put in another vital layer of buffer.

However, with Granger he had no such restrictions. It would be a trifle inelegant to enter her rooms during the night when she was asleep and hit her with a killing curse, but Dumbledore could do it that way if he so chose.

He would have to delay that option until his arm was healed, however.

No, now might actually be an excellent time to arrange another circumstance that turned out to be a deadly trap, as with any good fortune, he might get Harry destroyed at the same time as his 'twice golden watcher.'

And he even had a convenient werewolf to blame things on!

Albus chuckled. Yes, things were looking up indeed.

Then his face slackened, as his web informed him of something going wrong with a routine mind-rape by Snape, where his Potions Professor was actually the one distressed, then began screaming.

Seconds later his Potions Master had died shrieking in horrible madness.

That was going to cause complications.

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Albus arrived at the Potions classroom in the dungeons after a brisk and speedy walk, yet was already behind the bulk of gawkers and early arrivals. Half of Slytherin House was present, no, make that three-quarters, as some had been pressed back around a corner of one hall. The other Houses were more than adequately represented, with everyone straining to see.

Luckily, Professor Flitwick and Madam Hooch had taken charge, and forced the audience back, permitting none to enter the actual classroom.

Albus arrived just in time to see Madam Pomfrey burst out of the room and be messily sick on the floor, throwing up her lunch in great, disgusted heaves. Flitwick had pity on her and cast a charm cleaning up the mess.

It was clear from Flitwick's eyes that he had seen inside. Hooch too.

A minor complication at best.

There came relief to the faces of his staff as Albus hove into view, and the students were gently encouraged to let him pass through the press of bodies until he reached the cleared zone around the entrance.

Flitwick motioned him inside with a grave motion of his tiny head. Albus did so, and heaved a sigh upon sighting the body of his old friend, laying there headless in a spray of his own gore.

It was really quite messy.

Nevertheless, Albus schooled his features into the kindly grandfather mask, one bearing good news, and poked his head back out the door to announce, "So good of you to show concern, my friends. But it was really quite small of an accident. Despite whatever wild exaggerations rumor may have told you, Professor Snape is still quite well, and shall be rejoining us momentarily. I fear whatever sprays of blood you may have heard of were merely the professor having broken his nose. Classes will resume tomorrow."

Flitwick and Hooch were staring at Albus as if he were the one missing his head, and so they missed it when his wand waved below their eye levels (meaning he had to cast it quite low to avoid Flitwick's gaze) as Dumbledore wordlessly cast a memory-modifying charm, making them believe his story.

Then he did the same to Pomfrey, who was also looking up at him in disbelief. Although, in her case, he added the addendum that her violent reaction was to the smell of a poorly-brewed potion.

One from near the Gryffindor side of the classroom. Albus would have made it belong to Harry Potter, but did not know which seat the boy had occupied, as portraits did not tend to survive the many accidents in that room, and ghosts grew bored so quickly when stationed in one place as to be completely useless, their attention wandering until they could notice nothing.

The situation outside taken care of, students departing as they discussed the news, Dumbledore went inside the classroom, shutting and locking the door behind him.

He went over to Snape's body, levitated it, then took the route through the man's office before turning his steps onto secret courses

that led further down, below the dungeons, to one of Hogwarts more hidden vaults. There, he opened up a secure door, and went inside, his Potion teacher's corpse floating in after.

Dumbledore wasted no time. They'd not had to do this often, but this was not the first time his Potions Professor had so offended someone as to provoke murder. Quickly putting the body in one of those 'boil a missionary' sized cauldrons, he began mixing the other needed ingredients.

Elixir of Life, from Flamel's Stone he'd failed to destroy. Phoenix tears from his very own companion. Unicorn blood, the body to be regenerated, and, of course, Snape's horcrux.

The only problem was Dumbledore's arm exploded partway into the ritual, and the old man had to clutch his own bleeding wound, cauterize the stump, and start it over again, this time holding his wand in his off hand.

Snape emerged, screaming incoherently and thrashing about in madness moments later, almost oversetting the great cast iron pot he sat in.

Dumbledore frowned. He'd been afraid of this complication. The madness was evidently quite strongly rooted in Snape's psyche, to have survived his death, as it were.

The Headmaster sighed. He'd been afraid this might have happened when Hogwarts had informed him of this teacher's death. Being driven mad before death always complicated the issue, and deprived him the ability to question his subordinate as to how his demise had happened. Even a legilimency probe revealed a ruined mind too shattered to offer him any clues.

Sadly, Dumbledore could see no choice, so performed the necessary Obliviate to erase the traumatic experience that had driven Snape mad. In seconds, the man was looking about himself rationally and putting together clues.

"I perceive that, by my presence within this device, I met an unfortunate end, Albus? Since I have no recollection of it, can I assume I was ambushed? I'd thought I had most of my Slytherins too well in hand for that."

"Alas, we do not know." Albus was shaking his head in remorse over lost clues. "The wards informed me that you'd started screaming while with your third year class of Gryffindors and Slytherins. Shortly afterwards your head exploded. Since you revived clearly insane, I had to Obliviate the experience in order to recover you."

Snape calculated a bit, then nodded.

Dumbledore smiled as he continued. "Still, as it was all I could do to contain the news, I fear it shall be a small problem to recover the memories of some student who witnessed your demise. That should be enough to learn the method your murderer employed."

The Potions Professor climbed out of the pot and began to head for the door, only to be interrupted.

"Ah, Severus. If you please?"

Snape looked back to see the Headmaster indicating his own bloody sleeve, then nodded. "Yes, of course, Albus. How forgetful of me." Turning, the man came back into the room.

Smiling, the Headmaster replaced Snape's horcrux amulet on its heavily warded shelf in a heavily warded box that opened only on two conditions: Snape saying a password known to no one else (except Albus, of course, but Severus did not know the Headmaster knew it, as that ran contrary to their agreement - but one simply does not keep secrets from Dumbledore in his own castle!), and the death of Severus Snape.

Then, rather awkwardly since he was reduced to using one arm, Dumbledore climbed into the massive cauldron himself.

That was when Snape noticed that he was missing his wand. Sheepishly, he took one of the replacements stocked on a nearby

shelf, stored for in case they had to perform one of these rituals, having lost their own, and cast a killing curse into Dumbledore's smiling face.

The Headmaster slumped down, dead, inside of the massive cauldron and a heavily warded box on a heavily warded shelf popped open. Snape reached inside to remove the Headmaster's own horcrux, added the same ingredients previously used (and noted while he did so that the mandrake root was getting a little low - have to get Albus to order Sprout to grow more. Their last batch had been flagrantly wasted unpetrifying those students last year) and moments later the restored Albus Dumbledore was crawling out of the massive cauldron, using both arms.

"Ah, thank you, Severus. That is really quite rejuvenating. I had begun losing some of my teeth." Albus joked, quite calmly.

"Perhaps it's because of the many sweets you eat," Snape offered back.

"Indeed," Dumbledore chuckled, slapping his compatriot on his back as the two of them walked the path back out of the under-dungeon areas.

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Author's Notes:

Well, two people magically bound by unbreakable oaths to restore the other is the only sensible way to use a horcrux, now isn't it?

Actually, one MAJOR reason for keeping one's pet dark wizard around is he can be of use in performing any dark rituals that need doing, things that you could never ask a light wizard to do for you.

And Dumbledore TRUSTS Snape. Have you ever wondered why?

Chapter Eleven
by Lionheart

|||

"Ah, Harry. How are you and Hermione doing this fine morning?"

The couple looked up from where they'd been standing at the edge of the Forbidden Forest and about to enter, to see the young Ravenclaw coming directly towards them.

"Good morning, Luna." Harry answered. "How did you know I was here?"

"By your feet," she kindly pointed out. "They press down the grass."

The boy nodded. "Ok, fair enough. How did you know Hermione was with me?"

"Who else do you trust?" Luna came close and reached out, grasping a hold of the cloth, and, after a second feeling around for the front fold, allowed herself in. "Well, in past years, there would also have been Ronald. But you haven't had much time for him this year."

"We're sorry," Hermione apologized. "We keep meaning to, but with all our classes..."

"Oh, don't be," Luna affably cut her off. "It gives him less ammunition to use to start rumors behind your backs. You've both realized that people are less hostile to you this year? That's because Ron is so estranged from you no one believes anymore when he starts rumors saying you two shared in confidence with him things revealing how much you hate the other students at school. It is starting to make people wonder how much of what, along those lines, he's told them in the past might not be true."

Hermione's eyes had bugged open, and her mouth flew wide.

Luna gazed at her curiously. "Oh? Don't tell us you don't recall your first year, when Ron was saying all of those horrible things and telling

people he was just passing on what Harry told him? There were those months before the troll you were on the outside of this."

"But... but I thought..." the bushy haired one stammered.

"No, you didn't think. You trusted. And Ron was not a good choice of person to trust. In fact, he is a very poor one. Have you never wondered why Harry here is so isolated? Everyone in our world supposedly adores him, and yet here at school he is ostracized until he is practically a pariah. How is it that the world as a whole can love him, but the school, as a subset of that whole, hates or avoids him almost universally?"

Seeing Hermione gape in wordless astonishment, Luna fired off a clincher, "Why do they buy ugly rumors like him being the 'Heir of Slytherin' so easily and so completely? Yet never trust him when he says otherwise? Doesn't he have the image of a hero? He certainly performs heroic actions. So why does everyone here seem to view him as some sort of villain just waiting to throw off his cloak and start killing people?"

Harry was nodding. "Negative PR. Someone has been working very hard to blacken my image, yet it would have to be someone close to me, or else the rumors would not seem very credible. People would think Malfoy were just jealous, if he tried. Most people don't have the kind of position to launch a smear campaign, as people would know they didn't have access to the right sort of information to go against the public perception like that. They'd have to have close access to me to reveal my 'secret nature' to all, in order to get me hated like this."

"But WHY?" Hermione starting shaking her head at the nonsense of it all.

"One of the five great questions." Harry slid an arm around each girl's waist and led them deeper into the forest. "Once we know Who, What, Where, How and Why we'll have the entire story. But I think you're starting out at the hard end. We'll only know that one once we've already got answers to most of the others. I think our first clue is Who, and my first guess as to that lies somewhere in the vicinity of another

question: Who was it who arranged for me to be waiting, scared and helpless, abandoned outside the platform for the Hogwarts Express? And was it this same person who told Ron to use that easily disproven lie to share a compartment with me?"

"Somebody set you up!" Hermione breathed in horrified wonder. "Someone wanted you to meet the Weasleys, and for Ron to be your friend, then used him to spoil your reputation!"

"Now we know a bit of What they have done, the Why seems more obvious." Luna observed. "Someone wanted to isolate Harry, to hurt him, or make him more vulnerable, less influential and all of that. Ron has been their tool to this end from the beginning."

"But the Weasleys are NOT a dark family!" Hermione was shaking her head, then threw down her hands in frustration. "Argh! I could so easily see a Death Eater wanting to do this, and that's probably what Draco was trying to do when he offered Harry his hand in friendship. But why would a Light family want to hurt Harry?"

"Again, you're starting at the hard part," Harry reminded. "Why is always the most difficult question to answer. What is usually far easier. And if you can solve one or two others, the rest usually fall into line."

"Speaking of that, What are we doing out in this forest today?" Luna asked while batting her eyelashes.

Harry sighed. "Do you remember dinner last night?"

"Of course!" both girls choruses. Who could forget? But Hermione took it on herself to elaborate. "Professor Snape showed up, which was shocking seeing as how we all witnessed his death in class before. But he seemed hale and healthy, up until he started eating and his guts exploded out over the Slytherin table, then he burned to ashes from the inside out."

Harry fought hard to conceal a grin.

While he'd been shocked and disappointed to see Snape alive after having killed him once, it didn't appear that he'd robbed Bellatrix of her kill after all. She's just taken longer to get to him, that's all.

"Unfortunately, Snape appears to have survived both his deaths," he commented.

"Unfortunate? Harry!"

The Boy-Who-Lived placed his finger gently over Hermione's mouth, stopping her rant. Gently, he instructed. "Hermione, we both saw him die, not once but twice. We didn't miss anything and we weren't mistaken. First his head exploded, which is not something even wizards survive, and then he burned to ashes right before our eyes. That's not something you can fake. He died both times."

"But... he's alive," the brainy girl muttered. "We saw him after. He..."

"And that's our problem," Harry instructed. "There are a number of ways that a wizard can survive having died, but they are all, every one of them, tremendously dark rituals. So..."

Finally her eyes widened. "Harry! Are you saying Snape..?"

"Is it really any surprise?" Harry gently teased.

They walked in silence for some time while Hermione worked to get her eyes to stop bugging out, and her wild thoughts under control. "But, if that's true..." she started.

"The most likely method he used was a horcrux, a soul anchor," Harry informed her, letting Luna quietly listen in to their discussion. "The Hogwarts library card catalog lists the books that show you how to make one. They are in the Restricted Section, but we know that's not any barrier to students, and certainly none to professors."

"But, if he's using it for good purposes..." Hermione began trying to justify such a thing. After all, Dumbledore trusted him.

"Hah!" Harry snorted. "The price for the creation of a horcrux is to commit murder. Not just cause death, but cold-blooded murder of an innocent. But to any dark wizard that isn't a price at all, that's free! They commit murder for fun and profit! It is their SPORT! To say they can not only have their games of death, but gain a form of immortality at the same time? There's no cost to them in that. No, it's a wonder every Death Eater hasn't had a horcrux!"

"We know Snape was a Death Eater in the last war," Luna agreed. "In fact, a very high ranking one in their organization, reporting directly to Voldemort - and he was responsible for passing on information targeting Harry's parents for death. He, more than anyone save for Voldemort himself, is responsible for Harry being an orphan."

Hermione went back to gaping again. Once her astonishment was more fully mastered, the girl sputtered. "But..! He's a TEACHER! He shouldn't be..!"

Finally frustrated, Harry rounded on her, stopping the group's progress. "Hermione, do you commit murder or rape?"

"No!" She cried, shocked and appalled at the question.

"But you do admit that those things happen in our world?" He shot back.

"Yes," she allowed, puzzled.

"So," he concluded, "If you would not do them, but they happen, then it is clear that not everyone out there thinks or feels or acts the way you do."

She thought about it a moment before nodding, having never come to that realization before.

Harry sighed, resisting the urge to roll his eyes and thank god she'd finally seen that one, key issue. "That something 'shouldn't be' doesn't mean it isn't! Okay. So, the question no longer becomes why would YOU do something like that, but why another person might. Right? And to that we have plenty of answers. Think of a million

cheesy mystery novels and you'll get just as many motives. Who would put a murderer in place to teach at a school?"

"Someone who wants someone murdered would be one possibility," Luna supplied, feeling helpful. "And..." she drawled, "Since we already know that a person or persons has been working to isolate and destroy Harry..."

Hermione was back to shaking her head. "No! They'd first have to get it past Dumbledore! And I don't think..."

"You're not thinking, you're trusting," Luna corrected. "Just like with Ron."

Hermione stopped in her tracks.

"Leader of the Free World is a very nice sounding title, but has every United States President been fully deserving of our respect?" Harry asked gently.

"No," his best friend shook her head, not liking where this was going.

"What did Voldemort want?" Harry asked, changing the topic.

"To rule the wizarding world," the bushy haired one supplied cautiously.

"Who does?" he asked, very reasonably.

"Loads of people," she answered. "There's the Wizengamot..."

"Which is led by Dumbledore," he interrupted.

"But there is a magical legislature! It's..."

"Also headed by Albus Dumbledore," he coolly supplied.

"But there's the Minister of Magic! He..."

"Is famous for having worn out several post owls a year asking Dumbledore for advice on every subject, and over everything he does. Something he's done across his entire term of office, after Dumbledore turned down the job." Harry gave in to the urge to roll his eyes.

"And you missed one," Luna supplied rather helpfully. "It's the International Confederation of Wizards - also headed by Albus Dumbledore."

Hermione was staring at them, then frowned. "But having power doesn't make someone evil..."

"Neither does it make them pure and white. THINK Hermione!!" Harry pled. "If you wanted to rule the wizarding world, what would you want that Dumbledore doesn't ALREADY HAVE?!"

The girl was left speechless.

"Hitler and Stalin had loads of power. Being in charge doesn't necessarily make anyone a nice person!" Harry insisted.

"But he defeated Grindelwald," Hermione objected in a small voice.

"Stalin helped defeat Hitler," Harry answered simply back. "That didn't stop him from murdering twenty million of his own countrymen in bloody purges." He sighed, but forged on, closing his eyes. "And I defeated Voldemort, but you don't see me holding virtually every office of authority in our world."

At that Hermione ventured a small smile. "No, I don't."

It was actually reassuring. He was just Harry.

Harry steeled himself, before continuing to walk out into the Forbidden Forest with the girls huddled with him underneath the invisibility cloak and holding a whispered conversation.

"Hermione, do you know why this forest was originally forbidden?"

"Yes, of course. Hogwarts: A History is always talking about the various dark creatures in there," the young lady answered.

Harry couldn't help but chuckle.

"What's wrong?" she pressed him, confused at his reaction.

"I'm not laughing at you, just the situation. I've read that book myself, and it is wrong on this issue. Only the latest printings carry that explanation. There was a copy printed in the 1940s, before Dumbledore became Headmaster, that had an entirely different version of that story."

Hermione stopped and faced him, sucking in her lips. "Can you let me read it?"

"Of course, but I can also summarize the details," he answered affably.

Hermione dragged him over to a stump and sat them down on it, looking up at him expectantly.

Harry laughed. "Very well. The forest is as old as the castle, and the wizards back then were not shy about dangerous creatures. They were the ones building dragon preserves and taming those great beasts to ride, defeating manticores and mastering sphinxes. If there were anything so simple as a threat in there, they would've dealt with it."

Harry paused to draw breath before rushing on, "This place was created as a PRESERVE! A refuge for all sorts of LIGHT side creatures!! A 'no-hunting' zone where phoenix', fairies, unicorns and so on could survive and breed, so the magical world would not ever lose those precious creatures! This was to be a place where everything good and gentle and beautiful could be preserved for future generations! Up until fifty years ago it was forbidden for any sort of dark creatures at all! It wasn't until Dumbledore came to power that they called off the twice-yearly hunts through the forest to drive out all of the evil creatures that tried to creep in! Heck, the centaur tribes in the forest HELPED US on those rides!"

Hermione's jaw was hanging open.

Harry was standing, clenching his fists. "Now the fairy populations are down to a record low, having been fed upon until they're nearly extinct by the growing acromantula menace in there. Werewolves and other dark things infest the place. The unicorns are dying off... everyone now just accepts the place as a festering pit of darkness and evil. And why? Because Dumbledore made it that way. He let people seed it with the worst sort of dark creatures imaginable, then did nothing to remove them, in spite of nearly a thousand years of tradition saying he had no right at all to let anything like that exist in what was to have been a precious preserve for good magical life!"

Harry drilled Hermione with a glance. "The very worst of all dark Slytherin Headmasters had never sunk so low. This forest was one of FOUR places in the world where unicorns roamed free, and now over half their population has died, gone to feed the hunger of creatures like those acromantulas - who'll be moving on to human babies the moment they've exhausted this forest. But what will the world look like when no unicorns exist to grant hair for wand cores? Only three ingredients like that still get used, and unicorn tail hairs are one of them. There used to be dozens. What happens when this one is gone? Will wands choose fewer wizards, because the ones who might have matched them now have no ingredients for appropriate cores?"

He sighed. "Hermione, try a mental exercise. Just for a minute, imagine that Dumbledore is not the sort of person the books paint him to be. Imagine him as someone like Voldemort; now try to put the puzzle pieces together for all of these mysteries. Ask yourself all of the questions, like why was Nicholas Flamel's Philosopher's Stone stored here, when they knew Voldemort would be coming after it? Why endanger the students like that? And why couldn't Dumbledore just tell everyone a basilisk was stalking the halls, when every painting reports to him? Why were dementors allowed around the school? How is it that this place has been so dangerous ever since we got here? It didn't used to be like this. The school's never been so dangerous in history!"

Luna broke in to add her own bit, "And who is trying to kill Harry?"

Hermione thought about it for a moment, and then looked green. "I guess it could be. Things do sort of make sense that way."

"To get back to our main point, Snape died twice yesterday right before our eyes, yet he lives." Harry stated. "The only way that is possible is through tremendously dark magic. We know of a way it is possible - the books for one such method exist in the Hogwarts library (which is another of those things that ought to get our jaws dropping. What kind of MORON keeps those types of spells available in a SCHOOL of all places?!). So Snape had access to the knowledge of how to do it, and he was a Death Eater, someone who kills with as little feeling as a golfer hits little white balls. So he had access to the chance to commit murder and create one. We know SOMETHING is keeping him alive in spite of dying several times. Do you have a better answer?"

Hermione shook her head, still looking green. "But, why would Dumbledore want to kill Harry?"

Luna shook her head sadly. "You still keep trying to start at the hardest possible question to answer: Why. You NEVER know that one until you've solved some of the others! Weren't you listening to Harry explain that?"

"Start over again at the What, that's usually the easiest to get some feelers on," Harry told her, supporting Luna on this. "And the What, in this case, is that Albus Dumbledore controls virtually all aspects of magical government. Over the years he has defended that position from several rivals, notably Voldemort and Grindelwald. Perhaps he's just tired of fighting off rivals and hopes to get rid of me before I become one?"

"Dumbledore got those most of those positions through his reputation for having defeated Grindelwald. Wouldn't another person, having the same type of reputation, only bigger, be an even greater threat to him than openly Dark Lords could ever be?" Luna asked reasonably.

The Granger girl's head was spinning.

"Hermione," Harry relented. "Don't believe me. Do some research for yourself. Don't listen to those books singing Dumbledore's praises. Put some facts together and ask yourself what makes sense. Can you do that for me?"

She nodded.

"Actually, there is a safer, more immediate option," Luna interjected. "Why don't we put him to a test? Hermione, you want to believe what everyone believes about Albus Dumbledore, that he is a perfect paragon of all that is good in the magical world, correct?"

Hermione nodded.

"Very well," Luna explained. "Then let us examine that. A good person, in a position of power, uses that power for good purposes, does he not?"

"Yes!" Hermione smiled brightly.

"So, our question becomes, does he? Dumbledore has plenty of power. Let us take a moment to stop and examine what he does with it. Let's look close to home, shall we? The position of authority he bears that has the most immediate bearing on us is being Headmaster of Hogwarts, is it not?"

She got nodding.

"And we have the most direct personal experience with? So the most data to judge by? Therefore the most evidence for the most correct conclusions?"

More nods.

Luna nodded herself. "So, taking this as our example, assuming for the moment that it will be representative of all of his uses of power, what has Headmaster Dumbledore done for Hogwarts, that we know? First question: Does it provide a good education? Count up the teachers who do a good job versus the ones that do not."

Hermione's face paled.

"It is his direct responsibility," Luna reminded. "No other person has as much say on the hiring or firing of teachers as the Headmaster. So nothing ought to bear his mark as much as the quality of our instructors. Whether we have good teachers or bad is almost entirely the work of our Headmaster. So, do we have the uniform good instruction a good man would try to give us?"

Hermione was horrified.

"Count out loud," Harry suggested. "It helps sometimes. On the good side we have McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout. All of whom are at least decent, even though none strikes me as being particularly stellar or inspiring."

"On the bad side, however," Luna counted, "We have Snape, Trelawney and Binns, who do nothing but drive students away from those subjects, the very worst sort of teaching imaginable. You'd do better with no instructor at all, just reading those subjects out of books."

"Astronomy is also centuries behind what is known in the muggle world," Hermione grudgingly agreed at last.

"And what about Muggle Studies?" Harry questioned.

Hermione made a face.

"So we have three teachers who are not just bad, they are epically horrible," Harry concluded. "I've read Snape's records, and he is the worst teacher the school has ever had, bar none, getting fewer graduates with lower grades than ever before recorded. But Binns and Trelawney are not far behind him. Any one of the three of them could have and should have been removed for incompetence long ago. That any one of the three of them is allowed to teach is a scandal, that all three are is an outrage. Anyone who cared about students at all would've removed them all long ago. Snape alone commits WEEKLY offenses that would get any other teacher not just

fired, but blacklisted for life! Entire schools have been CLOSED DOWN over lesser offenses! I can show you the paperwork on them when we get back to our quarters. But Dumbledore just sweeps it all under the rug, not just ignoring, but actively defending his man."

Hermione looked sickly.

Luna softly added. "But they aren't the only bad teachers. We've also got plain old ordinary incompetent ones about."

They waited a moment while Hermione digested those thoughts in silence.

"So, in conclusion, what does the evidence say? This is Dumbledore's direct and personal responsibility. No one else does this for him. He's handled every hiring or firing of staff since he began the job as Headmaster. It's all his own work. What do the results he's provided say about him?"

Hermione broke down in tears on the spot.

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Author's Notes:

Hm, while I'd fully intended to do other things, this whole chapter turned into a rant against Dumbledore. Worse still, I don't know how to remove it, since they are convincing Hermione, and that is vital to the plot.

Odd how things like that happen.

Oh, and it was a friend in the local school system who pointed out that Snape's behavior was bad enough to get schools closed down AND him blacklisted for life. They have rules about ethics, and he breaks every one of them.

Not the behavior of a soul tortured by remorse and seeking for redemption. No, not at all.

Chapter Twelve

by Lionheart

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"Why do we call it yesterday, anyway?" Hermione spoke, trying to change the subject after wiping away her tears. The two others had tried to console her, but hadn't interrupted her cry, either. "Really, it's the same day as today, it's just we had regular classes then and Muggle Studies today. Tomorrow will be Arithmancy, but they're all the same day. So, really, we ought to call this Muggle Studies Day, to keep it distinct from Arithmancy Day, and Regular Classes Day."

Then she looked at Luna and gave a horrified gasp over what stress had made her reveal.

Luna smiled softly in reply, dragging the older girl to her feet. "Don't worry about it. I knew you were time traveling all along by the wrackspurt infection. They get most dreadful around those who are temporally displaced."

Harry coughed into his fist. "And... I sort of have been sharing my Time Turner with Luna, so she could get some extra study done."

Hermione paused and stared at them for a moment, before giving up and rolling her eyes. "Well, it is against the rules, but why should I care? If only the man who GAVE the rules followed them... but he doesn't, so why should I?"

"That's the spirit!" Harry gave her a spontaneous hug.

Hermione gave her loyalty fully. She was either for something, or against it (or didn't care one way or the other, but that was only the case on issues she felt didn't concern her) and whichever way she committed herself fully.

Just minutes ago she had been totally committed for Dumbledore. Now she was against him, Harry could read it in her thoughts. It had taken a great force of persuasion to change her mind, but that was the way she was.

That worked in his favor now that she was on his side.

Luna, however, didn't have his ability to passively read minds, so the blonde Ravenclaw had to check another way. "So," she probed delicately. "Do you believe us? The quality of our instructors is his responsibility, and he's had the job too long to blame anything on his predecessor. Snape alone..."

"It's true!" Hermione interrupted, bursting into tears once more and shaking her head over the situation. "Insulting students in any way, shape, or form (such as referring to them as dunderheads) is enough to get a teacher fired by a school board and put a mark on their record! Calling a student 'stupid' got my third grade teacher fired! That's enough all alone. But Snape is so much worse..." she drew in a ragged breath, "Before you even count all the not-teaching, man-handling, yelling, and assigning dangerous projects to first time students, things that explode over the slightest mistake! In the muggle world, Snape's behavior would have gotten him arrested... and Dumbledore as well, for allowing it to happen!"

"And that's just his teaching style. We've not even dipped into his little side projects and extracurricular activities, like belonging to a club of murderers. If he'd had any remorse over that he would NOT have been tacitly advocating that philosophy over all those years he's been at Hogwarts!" Harry insisted.

"And this goes SO far beyond Snape!" Hermione wailed, tears flowing. "I think in your grand tally of Good vs Bad teachers you missed some of the worst of the lot! All the defense against the dark arts teachers, who not only include bad teachers, but those who've actively tried to kill Harry or other students! We start that count with a Voldemort possessed teacher, then a complete fraud ... and all this under the impression that the great Dumbledore has a phoenix to help him detect evil!"

"Not to mention his skill at legilimency," Harry added.

Hermione looked up, pausing in her tears for confusion, while Luna looked as though she'd been pricked by a pin. "Legilimency? What's that?" the love of his life inquired, while Luna looked on.

"The art of reading minds. If you're good enough, it can be done without any spoken incantation or wand movements at all - And Dumbledore is among the best of this century. He routinely uses it on staff and students. It would be impossible for him not to have known Quirrel was possessed or Lockhart was a fraud... or all of the stuff Snape does to students."

Hermione now looked downright angry.

'Yep,' Harry reflected. Dumbledore had lost what had to have been one of his most loyal and devoted followers - because Hermione's whole character was built around loyalty and devotion.

Well, knowledge and learning, too. She was nice like that.

"Need I mention that it is extremely illegal to use legilimency without the subject's knowledge and consent? Or that it is illegal to use on minors in any case?" Harry asked brightly.

Hermione now looked furious.

"We'll have to protect ourselves," Luna observed soberly.

"Yes, for now don't make eye contact with either Dumbledore or Snape - they both do it as a matter of routine." Harry shrugged. "I've got the books for Occlumency, the defense against legilimency, back in my room."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Hermione grabbed both their hands and started back towards the castle.

Harry dug in his heels, bringing her to a stop. "Wait! There is a reason we are out here, and I'd prefer to get that done first. There's a clearing just ahead that I need to use, and I was hoping you'd use with me."

"What is it for?"

"The Clearing of Solstices and Equinoxes?" Luna asked, then informed her friend. "It's an Old Magic circle, dating back from before Hogwarts, but it's not anything tremendously special. It's only property is a simple one - every day or night there is, mystically or astrologically speaking, the same as the last solstice or equinox to pass. All it does is make timing less inconvenient for certain rituals. So," she turned back to face Harry, "the question becomes, what ritual are you hoping to accomplish there?"

"One requiring heat, and the summer solstice is the longest day of the year, so, mystically and astrologically speaking, a symbol of Fire," he answered.

"So you would want to get there before the Fall Equinox, which is coming up, as the circle resets to the most recently passed solstice or equinox, and the end of September is fast approaching," the blonde reasoned.

"Which wouldn't do at all. Fall is the harvest, so a symbol for Earth, not the sort of mystical connection I'm looking for," he agreed.

"Wait. They haven't covered this in Astronomy class, nor is it in any of my books," Hermione objected. "What are these elemental connections you're talking about?"

"They only come up in very old styles of magic," Harry reassured. "Nature based styles, for the most part. The Hermetic tradition taught at Hogwarts, which does not use it, naturally leaves that information out."

"But you know?" Hermione eyed Luna askance.

The girl smiled. "Most fairy lore comes to us out of the Celtic traditions. As Lovegoods are magical creatures experts, naturally I am more familiar."

"And... what's the difference between that and the Hermetic? That's not covered in our course material, either," Hermione explained.

All eyes went to him, and Harry shrugged. "Blame Magical History class, that is where this material is supposed to be covered. This is actually important to know, but instead even the texts he's chosen only cover the various goblin rebellions. In brief, the Hermetic Tradition is based on Natural Philosophy, which later grew up into science, and it still bears a very scientific approach you'd be able to recognize if the present practitioners weren't all idiots."

"It's named for the Greek God Hermes, who was later renamed Mercury by the victorious Romans when they stole that pantheon." Luna supplied. "He was the messenger god, patron of thieves... and magicians."

"So, in short, Greco-Roman magic. It became the norm in Europe because, well, Romans had conquered all of the continent, and societies with different traditions largely died out or got subsumed." Harry added. "Everything the common muggle is likely to associate with a generic wizard is Hermetic: the books and tomes, candles and skulls, chalk circles and demon summonings."

Both of his audience paled at the mention of demon summonings.

"Some elements of other traditions did survive," he continued. "There was crossover and bleed through because the Romans never did pass up a chance to steal a good idea when they saw one. But the parent philosophies are long gone, and the emphasis isn't there in the Roman stuff, who preferred magic out of their own roots on which they had a stronger basic understanding. Ancient Runes is actually one of those 'borrowed branches' so to speak. But where the Norse viewed Runes as their primary style of magic, and could accomplish great things with it, to us it is merely a sideline; one not too well understood, at that. Only a glimmer of the original potential peeks through. Although the use of wands is something we inherit from the Egyptians, who passed that on to the Greeks, then to the Romans, then to us."

Hermione was impressed in spite of herself at her friend's knowledge. "So this is the sort of thing that is supposed to be covered in History of Magic?"

"Oh, absolutely!" he quipped back. "I've got some wonderful books I'd like to share with you on that subject, as well as others. But more of our classes than not are absolutely useless! For example, our Astronomy course skips over all of the reasons WHY you'd want to know that subject! And yet it is a core class! If it wasn't something absolutely vital, why do they make every student take it for at least five years? If it was something optional, why isn't it just an elective? But if it is vital, why is it that nobody knows any magic that uses what they learn there? Even I only know of stuff OUTSIDE of our current magical tradition, and that's after extensive study!"

Hermione paled again at that thought.

Harry inhaled to sigh deeply. "People who don't know WHY they need to know something are generally very unlikely to put any real effort into learning it. So most of us graduate without any idea what makes that course so special or important - and so to most of us it feels neither special nor important. So, in the end, most people don't ever really end up learning it."

"Nor is that the only course that completely fails to do what it sets out for," Luna added. "Why is it 'the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world' has such terrible brooms for the students to learn on? A good, solid (and slow) broomstick, like the Comet 260, would be much better. With the hideous fees the school charges, they should be able to replace the brooms on a regular basis (or at the very least, on a rotating basis). Why don't they? There is money they get for the purpose of doing it, a chunk of the tuition we all pay is earmarked for that. But no new brooms have been bought since Dumbledore became Headmaster. Anything new they get as donations. So where is all of the money going that ought to be spent on new brooms?"

"For that matter, most of the 'clubs and services' portion of our tuition bill have been dropped or had their funding cut to nothing, while retaining the full costs to students, as if we still had a dozen sports clubs, and equally funded subjects clubs. Charms and Transfiguration clubs once had budgets as large as Quidditch does now, and Quidditch used to have a dozen games a year. They still charge us

as if they do. So where has all the money gone?" Harry asked. "The Potions club doesn't even accept non-Slytherin members."

Hermione was fuming. "When you put someone in charge of something, and everything goes to ruins, who is to blame?" she mumbled, shaking her head. Then she clenched her fists, "OOOOHH!! It makes me so ANGRY! Dumbledore ought to be SHOT for doing this to our educations! My parents are paying ruinous fees for this! I ought to at least be able to count on getting the good education this was billed as! Cheltenham Ladies College doesn't charge this much, and that was where I was going before my Hogwarts letter arrived!"

There was fire in her eyes, and they walked on a few minutes in invisible silence. Then the maiden visibly calmed herself, and went back to an earlier subject. "So, what are the symbols, and where can I read about this Celtic tradition you're talking about?" the bookworm grinned.

"The Celts had, unfortunately for anyone alive now, a largely verbal lore that did not survive their passing," Harry remarked. "Researching it can be a pain - but then, we don't know as much about Greece or Rome as most people tend to think we do, either. Our best bet would be to talk to a ghost. But good luck finding one that old."

"But the seasonal symbols?" Hermione reminded.

"Well, we've told you Earth and Fire. Winter should be obvious as the coldest and wettest..."

"Water," Hermione concluded, then puzzled. "But that would leave Air for Spring, and I've never heard a connection..."

"You've never heard the expression 'that lovely Spring Air'?"

"Alright, I guess I have heard of a connection between spring and air," the bushy haired one backpedaled.

"It's also the season of flowers, when pollens and other scents are in the air. Scents are borne on winds. But you're right, the connection is

not a strong one to the modern way of thinking," Luna demurely supplied, then smiled. "But that doesn't mean it isn't there, or wasn't obvious to our ancestors."

By now the party had arrived in the clearing, and the brunette's reaction was obvious. "It's Stonehenge!"

"Not quite, but similar. There are actually dozens of circles of stones built along those lines, it's just that most of them are inherently unplotable, so unknown to muggles." Harry agreed. "Stonehenge is known because it's broken. So it became a tourist trap instead of a power tap."

Luna walked up to a standing stone, put her arm on it, then turned back to beam at the group. "You have to admit, there is a certain appeal to magic objects you can carry with you, like wands, rather than travel cross country to visit, like large stone rings."

"Convenience trumps quality," Harry agreed. "It always has, and always will."

With that simple statement he crossed a part of the clearing to behind some bushes. Coming around to see what he was up to, the girls saw one of those large tortoises, the really large kind rather than the petshop 'hold it in your palm' variety. This turtle was one of those big enough to ride, probably larger in mass than all three children gathered there around it.

Then they realized that it wasn't a turtle.

"Actually, it's a Fire Crab," Harry answered for them, seeing that the jewel-like shell had tipped them off. "They're native to the oceans around Fiji, and have to be protected not only against muggles, but against wizards who are tempted by their valuable shells, which make highly prized cauldrons - prized for very good reasons, I might add."

"I've read *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*," Hermione interjected primly, sucking in her bottom lip as she stared at the massive creature. "So I know about them, and that a few each year

are exported as pets. But how did you get the special license needed?"

Luna gave both of her companions a curious look. "They only export newly hatched ones. This one has got to be at least four hundred years old, by the size of it. Harry? Would you care to explain?"

The boy mentioned simply shrugged. "I have a contact within the Department for the Disposal of Dangerous Magical Creatures. Fire Crabs this big qualify, as even the littlest ones can shoot flame, and this one is so massive it could probably destroy a house in one blast. Anyway, it got discovered during a raid about a month ago and the wizard who owned it did not have a license for it. So, rather than see it chopped up and disposed of, which was what our ever-idiotic Ministry had eventually decided to do, I had him route it to me instead. And, yes, it came with an appropriate license for me to keep it."

Luna lofted an eyebrow at him curiously. "Considering that whoever wanted it chopped up almost certainly wanted its shell for a cauldron, that must be some contact."

"Quite," Harry agreed.

"Would you care to elaborate?" she asked, as Hermione looked on, curious.

Harry shrugged. "An ex-Death Eater who somehow escaped charges. I had evidence of his crimes. A simple case of blackmail, really."

Hermione's eyes shot wide. Seeing their gazes on her, Hermione shook her head. "No, I'm not actually surprised at the blackmail part. I think you did the right thing to bring this creature here alive, rather than see it destroyed. It's that Death Eaters are allowed to work at the Ministry that has me shocked."

Then she huffed a sigh, letting her hands fall to her sides. "Since Dumbledore is in charge there, as well as here at school, I shouldn't be surprised at that, should I?"

"No," Harry shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid that's the norm for him. He employs 'former' Death Eaters as a matter of routine. Don't ask me why. Say, on another subject, how would you like me to show you how to feed and clean a fire crab without getting burned?"

"Are you sure it's safe?" Luna cast doubtful eyes at Hermione, who stiffened in response.

"Not normally, no," Harry agreed. "However, I just happen to have a genius who follows instructions perfectly, and a budding magical creatures expert here with me; while I, myself, am already familiar with the procedure."

He waited a moment, and smiled at them still hesitating. "Plus, I've got some fire protection potions, and burn healing paste, should we need it." He held out two bottles to the girls.

Accepting one while Luna took hers, Hermione popped off the cap and asked, "Harry, why are you carrying this? How could you know we would come with you today? I almost didn't, you know. I left behind some fascinating reading."

The boy shrugged, taking his own. "You know those traps we encountered on the third floor in our first year? They convinced me that it might be a wise idea to start carrying some extra potions about, and I've been brewing since early summer."

"Oh?" Luna blinked. "What do you carry?"

Once again Harry shrugged, handing around tools to the girls. "I have four general categories: medical potions, enhancement potions, utility potions and weapon-like potions."

"Some examples?" Luna inquired softly.

The boy grinned at her. "Well," he drawled slyly. "I'm not done mixing them all yet, but for medicine I intend to carry various antidotes, blood replenishing potions, boil curing potions, bruise healing paste, burn healing paste, calming draughts, cough potions, drought of peace, invigoration draught, oblivious unction, pain reliving potions,

pepperup potion, various remedies, skele-grow and wound cleaning potions."

Hermione choked on her fire-protection potion. Coughing a bit, she sputtered, "But Harry, WHY?! You sound like you want to carry everything Madam Pomfrey stocks in the Hospital Wing!"

"Exactly," he told her calmly, eyes steady. "And why does she stock them? To deal with any emergency," he answered his own question. "So why would I feel like there might be emergencies when Hogwarts has always been so safe and secure for us?"

Hermione blushed at the inanity of her own question as the girls giggled at his sarcasm, then followed his lead and went to work, feeding and cleaning his giant magical pet.

"You mentioned weapon-like potions?" Luna inquired calmly as they worked.

He nodded, then explained, "When we were mixing a swelling solution last year I threw a firecracker into Goyle's cauldron to create a diversion. Where the solution splashed people's arms, noses, eyes, etc. were enlarged grotesquely. Goyle's eyes got to be the size of dinner plates before Snape gave him the antidote. But how many people, aside from myself that is, carry deflating draught as a matter of routine? Even Snape only has his in a supply cabinet in his classroom, and then only when he thinks he might use it. So it struck me that the next time I'm attacked, if I were to splash this over my enemies, it ought to really make it easy to get away from danger."

Both girls glowed at his wisdom and forethought.

"That's an excellent idea, Harry!" Hermione congratulated him, leaning down to help him maneuver the beast's water and food dish in front of it. "And it gets me to thinking. There have been countless potions accidents like that one just in our last two years. Why think! The very first potion we brewed, one for curing boils, exploded and burned holes through shoes and clothes, while giving poor Neville, who got hit with some, angry red painful boils. That's also something that I'm sure would make a decent weapon."

"Exactly," he nodded, glad she had seen the point (although he had already mixed some of the one she was recommending, having seen the usefulness himself). "Spells cause damage that can easily be cured by other spells. But most potions cause damage that can only be cured by proper medical potions - and who do you know that carries any?"

"You," both girls chorused, then broke out into giggles.

"Yes, and mixing them has kept me busy for weeks and weeks," he admitted.

Luna stopped what she was doing, then calmly asked, "Harry, half of those potions you mentioned as cures are OWL level work, and most others are NEWT level. Only a handful are at third year or below."

Her response earned a casual shrug. "My mother was a potions prodigy and I wanted to follow in her footsteps. Most of these are surprisingly easy once you don't have Snape hovering over your neck. Besides, I was doing all of the cooking for my relatives since I was old enough to reach the counter, and the basic principles are all the same."

"Plus Harry found the most wonderful book!" Hermione broke in excitedly. "It's called the Basics of Brewing by Vandergeist, and it explains things so well I KNOW I wouldn't have a problem on most OWL-level work!" she enthused.

"I've also got all of the advanced potions brewing manuals, and a little extra reading," Harry admitted. "It's really not hard to follow the instructions out of a book. That's all we ever do with Snape, anyway."

Smiling at his fellows, he then slapped the top of the fire crab's shell. "Okay now! Who wants to help me get this creature's shell off?"

"Harry!" Hermione goggled in sudden outrage. "I thought you got this creature to SAVE its life, not murder it yourself!"

"Calm, Hermione," he soothed. "And I did, and am. But I also need its shell for this project, which is why it's out here waiting for us, rather than back at the Potter Manor menagerie with the rest of the creatures I rescued from the axe of the disposal department."

He waved to the now-slumbering tortoise look alike. "Part of the food we just gave it was a dose of sleeping potion. Another was a numbing draught, so it won't feel a thing. I have blood replenishing potions on hand for if we screw up and injure it, but I also adapted a shaving charm to peel flesh away from the inside of its shell, so we shouldn't hurt it at all during the removal. Then, after we're done, I'm going to give it a good, strong dose of skele-grow so when it wakes up in the morning it will have grown a new shell and hopefully will never know what happened. Now, are you with me?"

His best friend had relaxed considerably during this explanation. "Sorry Harry. I shouldn't have doubted you. I know you better than that."

"Yes, you do," he scolded mildly right before showing them the spell, and they all got to work.

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Author's Notes:

Didn't go where I'd wanted it to go as quickly as I'd wanted it to get there, but we are getting there eventually.

Enough people complained, when I had Hermione going to Eton, that I decided to change it. At first I was going with Heathfield, but then Cheltenham Ladies College got mentioned. As I know nothing about either, I went with the latter as it sounds a little more snooty.

Chapter Thirteen

by Lionheart

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Harry kept his two companions busy all that morning helping him gather and prepare things for their ritual.

The Fire Crab was the first of many magical creatures he had hidden in that clearing. Next up was a salamander, a small fire dwelling lizard that fed on flame, and lived only as long as the fire from which it sprang burned. Their blood had powerful curative and restorative properties, so many wizards had arranged for permanent magical flames, hoping to spawn salamanders.

Naturally, anything that exists has to be regulated and taxed (or at least that is what governments believe), so the Ministry had fees and fines for keeping salamanders, and someone hadn't paid one.

The salamander thus confiscated, with the kiln that spawned and sustained it, had been routed to Harry's possession along with virtually every other magical beast in the Ministry's containment cells at the time.

Playing the 'Poor Little Orphan Boy' card wasn't worth much normally, unless you also happened to be the Boy Who Lived, and riding the crest of a wave of public sentiment in your favor after your near death experience followed by the shocking expose of your abusive home situation. At which point the 'oh woe is me' card had been more than sufficient to not only empty the Ministry holding cells for magical creatures directly into Harry's pockets, but grant him special hereditary exemptions and perpetual licenses so he (and any of his children after him) could keep basically any number of magical creatures forever, for free.

That was a privilege he was intending to milk for all it was worth, and it was one the magical government never would have allowed if they'd had time to think about it, as they'd just essentially surrendered all authority to govern Harry and his descendant's ability to keep magical creatures.

Wealth comes out of only a few sources in the magical world. One's personal skill could always be bartered away in service for cash, just like muggles got jobs, but actual wealth got created mostly by the raising of magical plants and creatures for use in the various potions and objects that made the world magical. There were no wands without cores, for example.

A greenhouse might as well have been a goldmine in the magical world. Neville, with his gift for plants, was going to grow up rich no matter what else he did.

So the unregulated ability to raise magical creatures was an untaxed diamond mine that could, if managed in any half-sane way, guarantee good fortunes for the Potter family forever. And it was just the sort of favor a 'wronged hero' got to ask for, if he was clever, when the Ministry's guard was down and desperately trying to make things up to him.

He'd also seen to it that the proper paperwork had been filed for this to be pushed through to all member countries of the International Confederation of Wizards and ratified on the strength of England's membership. Striking while the iron was hot and going for bonus points and all that, because England was not exactly safe for him, as it was Dumbledore's central seat of power.

Back at the clearing, the trio of young students had finished collecting the valuable blood, and dosed the salamander who'd granted it with some blood-replenishing potion, then moved on to other things.

Very soon they had all the ritual materials assembled.

Thanks to the Ministry, Harry now had three dragons: A Chinese Fireball, an Antipodean Opaleye, and a Swedish Short-Snout, all collected by an English hag who had tastes much like Hagrid. As a hag, she had a different concept of danger than most people and had kept a number of creatures illegally. Unlike Hagrid, she had a love of beauty, and had collected samples of the three most beautiful dragons, instead of the most deadly (ala baby Norbert).

She had been arrested, convicted, and executed on charges of eating human children, and her largely illegal beast collection had been seized while factions within the Ministry fought over who got what parts of it.

The dragons were all young, so it was not outside of Harry's ability to chain them down and feed them Continual Flame potions so they could hold up a steady stream of fiery breath. They had been laid out inside of the circle of stones arranged so that their draconic blowtorches came together on the central slab of stone where he'd placed the Goblet of Fire.

Normally that artifact's current charge could be measured by its appearance and when he'd found it the object had obviously been at very low power. The appearance of rough-hewn wood was the goblet's lowest setting, more of a form of hibernation than active ability.

After continual streams of fire from three dragons over twenty four hours, or thereabouts (Harry had set this up soon after his discovery of the goblet) under the light of the summer solstice, the magical chalice had undergone a gradual yet dramatic change. At first its plain, unblemished yet without grain wood-seeming look had darkened as if charred. On fully becoming black it had worked a change again, starting to glow as though a fiery coal. At no time did the goblet change its shape. It did not crack, shrink or crumble as it seemed to burn, and very soon it changed again, as from the now glowing coal bits of clear glass appearing from the white hot cinder shaped vessel. Soon the cup had transformed to an appearance of clear crystal. From that, it had begun to heat up again, once more glowing from within as though a fiery coal. This was not its final form, that of a brilliantly radiant ruby, lit from within and sheathed from without in blazing fire. But it was enough for Harry's purpose.

Actually, he knew only fragments of the cup lore and didn't know what you could do with it once it was fully charged. Legends all agreed that it was near impossible to handle when it was that fully powered. Spells slid off without touching it, and no flesh could touch it without burning. Metal would melt on contact, and so on, making it very difficult to do anything with.

Although he suspected that the keepers of the goblet had used the ritual he was now attempting, and thus could handle it just fine using bare flesh. There was a reason this ritual had existed in the first place and been so carefully recorded, after all.

Actually, it was probably for the best that he could not as yet unearth what uses the Goblet of Fire could be put to at its maximum setting, as he only had three dragons and they were all very young. The present 'glowing glass' appearance of the artifact was as high as they could charge it. But if he knew the higher powers he'd be out after them instead of using what abilities he could gain access to.

The trio soon had the dragons fed and watered and granted them antidotes to the Continual Flame potions they'd been under (which were somewhat stressful on their bodies over longer periods). Then, as soon as the dragons had succumbed to the sleeping and numbing draughts in their food, the three near teens went to work in much the same way as on the Fire Crab.

Harry's shaving charms had this time been adapted to peel away skin from the layers of fat and muscle underneath it. Flaying the backs and bellies of the dragons in this way would have been incredibly painful, if they'd been able to feel any of it. But skin was more easily regrown than bone using potions.

Although, in addition to collecting rolls of fine dragon hide, the students did also collect some relatively sizable portions of dragon fat and blood. The fat they immediately put into the goblet, which in seconds had boiled it down into tallow, and further spells refined into a few fine lamp oil, which they then poured out into separate containers, lest the goblet boil it away entirely.

While their dragon oil cooled, they bandaged and dosed the donor dragons so they'd be healed by the time they woke up.

Unbeknownst to the two girls (except perhaps Luna, who had ways of knowing things without ready explanation) Harry had originally transfigured sticks and chunks of logs into animated wooden soldiers to patrol and guard the clearing edges, so as to keep their work area

safe from interruption. So convalescing creatures ought to be perfectly safe there in spite of their injuries.

It also meant they could proceed to work without fear of getting ambushed by something like an acromantula. So they could focus their whole attention on doing things right instead of keeping a watchful eye out lest they be eaten by dark creatures of the forest.

Last of the major ingredients had also probably been the most risky of all to obtain. There were plenty of minor additives, like crushed fire opal, that had only a cost associated with them (and had been easily gained by going to a major gem cutter and collecting scraps and dust cut from finished jewels).

But while salamander blood and dragon oil were rare, they could be obtained if one was willing to pay the cost, get permits and wait in turn for the limited supplies. What could not be gathered themselves for this little ritual had been the priceless phoenix ash.

Fortunately, Albus had a barrel of the stuff collected, left over from Fawkes on his burning days. Unluckily, this was Albus Dumbledore's private stash, and was therefore considerably harder to raid than Snape's potion stores.

Harry had been forced to slap together a scheme to get some, one involving Dobby, Filch, and the unknowing cooperation of the Weasley Twins. The plan, as it had gone, had been a fairly simple matter of Dobby moving crates and barrels out of Dumbledore's private storehouse so that room could be properly cleaned. 'Filch' (really Bellatrix acting on Harry's orders) had then chased the twins, who had obligingly been committing a prank at the time, passed where those boxes and barrels had been moved to create room. The key barrel had been at the top of a set of steps, and predictably the twins had dumped that barrel down over the stairs to cover their escape from the caretaker, not only coating the steps in a thick layer of fine, slick ash, but creating an impenetrable cloud obscuring them from any further pursuit.

Dobby had then appeared, acted appropriately horrified, and vanished the ash apparently for good, but actually to Harry's own possession.

Dumbledore had been furious enough with the elf to grant him clothes, which was fine by Harry because he'd frankly hated looking at the elf dressed in nothing but a tea cozy and didn't dare order the elf to dress himself. But it did cost him his most valuable spy and smuggling route.

In his mind the cost was more than worth it, as Dobby could still perform his duties as Harry's private servant (and he was bound to Harry anyway, so the Headmaster granting the elf clothes did nothing but cover his nearly naked body), and Harry got some absolutely priceless phoenix ash out of it.

A whole barrel full, actually. Dobby hadn't missed a speck. Harry carried this priceless resource in a magically expanded golden snuff box he carried in a moke skin bag around his neck, waterproofed so he could shower while still wearing it. Barrels were cheaper, but this was safer, and Harry didn't have the protections of the Headmaster's Tower securing things for him.

A bubbling alchemical apparatus had processed a small portion of this ash into a form of magical lye. Pouring the dragon oil and fresh salamander blood into this same apparatus set up slightly differently yielded, after some small amount of arcane processing, an extremely valuable balm or ointment.

While this simmered, undergoing dramatic changes, the group carried water from a nearby stream in golden buckets that they purified with a drop of phoenix tears per gallon (probably the most expensive part of the whole arrangement, although the tears, at least, could be bought instead of stolen) and Luna assisted further by getting together a trio of unicorns to not only carry the water for them, but to breathe on the buckets as they were being filled and emptied.

Unicorn breath was almost as good as phoenix tears for purifying, as the latter's properties were primarily for healing.

Having filled their fire crab cauldron that way, they set it on a tripod above where the goblet still rested and had, until recently been heating. Then using a ladder they added a plethora of lesser ingredients, fire blossoms and other primarily herbal things.

By the time they got around to rather laboriously shaving a demiguise that had been fed Dragon's Whisker Soup so it'd spawned positively acres of hair, they all were getting tired.

Hermione sat down rather heavily on a stone slab and wiped a bit of her own hair, damp with sweat, out of her eyes, before fanning her shirt front to get some air circulation inside and cool off. "What is this ritual for, anyway?"

"Fire protection," Harry answered simply, finishing off the shaving job and leaving the demiguise looking like a hairless ape. While the yeti-like creature was normally invisible that was primarily because of the properties of its marvelous fur, all of which they'd just removed.

"All of this, for that?" Hermione's eyes bugged out unbelievably. "We can get that through a simple potion! Or there's the Freezing Flame charm!"

"Both of which are temporary, and have upper limits," Harry instructed. "I want to go through this because the protection provided is not only good for your whole life, but it has been proven against dragon breath and other fires none of the lesser measures will guard against. And there are other benefits as well. For example, tales say we should be able to cast fire based charms and curses wandlessly, and with a considerable boost in power."

Luna blinked in recollection. "I also recall a tale that says this will protect us against non-flame forms of burning, like touching hot metal or sunbathing on the Sahara. None of that is possible with normal magic, which would have you use spells to cool the metal first, or shade yourself."

"Oh," Hermione blinked a few times. "Well I guess that's alright then. But I still find it hard to believe that it requires so many ingredients!"

"Oh, it doesn't," Luna spoke softly before Harry could.

"WHAAT!? Then what have we been doing all morning?" Hermione gestured to the stacks of dragon hide rolls, bales of demiguise hair, and other things.

Luna fixed her with an odd stare. "You'd find it awkward to survive a burst of dragon flame if your clothes didn't, wouldn't you?"

Thinking about it a half second, Hermione blushed furiously.

"Pearls and coral for buttons," Harry stood and began identifying bags. "No non-organic produced thing can be subject to the ritual, so unfortunately no metal for clasps or zippers. Still, we've got dragon hide for protective gear, boots and gloves and so on. We're lucky to have it in three different colors. It's good to have a little variety, since we'll be wearing this most of our lives if this works right."

"Demiguise hair for invisibility cloaks," the Granger girl interrupted. "So we could walk through walls of fire like guarded the Stone our first year without leaving a trace of passage or losing our invisibility. But what about..?"

She paused and blushed furiously again.

"Cotton and equivalents for underwear and things?" Luna inquired.

"And pants and blouses," Hermione tried to pretend that she hadn't nailed her exact thought and mentioned unmentionables in front of Harry.

The boy stretched, having labored hard all morning. "Well," he explained. "I've had animated glass spiders with spindles instead of abdomens gathering up acromantula webbing throughout the forest. That ought to cover silk, and we already have leather. But your right, we don't have a cotton-like material."

"Demiguise fur is very much like alpaca wool," Luna offered softly. "Higher quality than either sheep or llama."

Hermione looked at her askance. "Yes, but you'd look quite odd if you made a blouse out of it and your chest became invisible."

"You would?" Luna pretended dreamy puzzlement.

Hermione rolled her eyes in frustration.

"It might actually not be bad for a set of pajamas," Harry considered. "When you don't particularly want people to look at you anyway. It could be an edge if someone attacked you during the night."

Hermione frowned for her own reasons, that Luna then bluntly explained. "Actually Harry, most girls tend to 'sleep light' and prefer a simple long T and panties when weather allows."

Harry looked over to where Hermione had buried her face in her hands in embarrassment, and grinned. "Yes. You'd look a trifle odd being a head with a pair of unconnected arms and legs running around, wouldn't you?"

"I'd like to try it," Luna grinned. "Just around the dorms, of course. But even so, cotton is lighter and more comfortable than wool."

"Well," Harry sighed. "I suppose I could just have Dobby bring all your current clothes and things out of your trunks. I doubt they'll last long. Less valuable materials tend to corrode under heavy, magic-intensive enchantments, which was why I was going for so many magical materials."

His best friend drew in a long breath and tried to banish her flaming blush. "Actually Harry, until the invention of the cotton gin, cotton had long been considered a luxury fabric equal to silk. It is labor intensive to grow, can only be planted and cultivated in areas too hot for man to easily live, plants are nasty with thorns so harvest is both miserable and labor intensive, and even then the little puffballs are filled with seeds that are especially hard to get out. Throughout history people used slaves to grow it because no one with any choice in the matter wanted anything to do with the plants. It wasn't until we had cultivators and machinery to handle the miserable tasks that the cloth became at all common. Until then people mostly wore linen."

She looked up and met his eyes. "And so, like cultivated pearls, what once had been a fantastically costly luxury item became cheap and affordable to anyone." Seeing he didn't know what she was talking about, she explained further. "The Spanish raiding the Americas liked having gold and jewels, but they considered the pearls they found by far the cream of the crop. Then we learned the secret of cultivating them, and now we have pearl farmers who churn them out by thousands so any girl can wear some. They're almost costume jewelry for price, one step up from plastic or bare metal."

"And so the cotton of our current clothes might survive the ritual." Harry nodded. "Dobby!"

Soon they had all of the clothes out of their trunks. The girls also wanted their clothing from home, but Harry successfully pointed out that they didn't know, they only suspected, that the materials of their ordinary clothes would survive the process. And it was best not to risk it all when they could repeat the process as needed should it happen to work.

So they loaded in to the fire crab cauldron their large spools of acromantula silk, rolls of dragon hide, demiguise hair and Harry's father's invisibility cloak.

Harry had been one busy camper arranging all of this. But the crowning glory of all of the work had been a separate and very special potion simmering in the Goblet of Fire all yesterday under the sun of the summer solstice.

The three teens, fully clothed, all climbed into the cauldron of fire crab shell, fitted on the lid that used to be its underside armor, all their heads poking out of former leg holes. Then Harry poured in the potion brewed in the Goblet of Fire, causing the entire mixture to change colors to pure blue white, then bubble and froth.

"So, what happens now?" Hermione asked, excitedly.

"I dunno." Harry mused. "No one's ever done the ritual this way before."

"WHAAAT??" The bushy haired one panicked.

"Isn't this exciting?" Luna asked cheerfully.

At that moment, the sun hit noon and a brilliant shaft of its light came down and illuminated the cauldron. The magic overcame and they slid down beneath the surface of the fluid. All of this was planned and prepared for. What was not was a small fairy flying into the clearing while this mixture simmered under the golden light, then going out to return with a small cloud of the curious critters, who began to take dips and dives into the cauldron.

More and more fairies appeared as the sun moved through its progress from noon, where the soaking and simmering part of the ritual began, to high noon (one o'clock) when it ended.

Before the ritual was even halfway done the entire clearing was swarming, so thick with fairies that no one could see, even if they were awake to do so.

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Harry opened his eyes on a chamber filled with multicolored fairies of every kind. Hovering just before his nose was a small group consisting of three with butterfly wings and one like a dragonfly. They looked like slender women not quite two inches tall. He gave an involuntary start at seeing them so close and all four zipped away.

Sitting up, the boy looked around himself, seeing fairies literally everywhere, in all conceivable varieties, flitting about, exploring blossoms, gliding on a breeze, and acrobatically avoiding Hermione when she rolled over. Harry could see the fairy women appeared to represent all nationalities. Some looked Asian, some Indian, some African, but mostly European. Several were less comparable to mortal women, with things like blue skin or emerald hair. A few had antennae. Their wings came in all varieties, mostly patterned after butterflies, but much more elegantly shaped and radiantly colored. All the fairies gleamed brilliantly, outshining the flowers like the sun outshines the moon, and they wore miniature clothing that matched.

"Ah. You're awake."

Harry turned to see Luna regarding him calmly. Her words also seemed to rouse Hermione, as that girl gave off a start, sending off a cloud of hovering fairies zipping off from around her, before she sat up, blinking in wonder.

"Where are we?" Harry rubbed at his eyes and straightened his glasses.

Luna smiled. "The Forbidden Forest, as you said, was created as a preserve a millennia ago, a refuge for Light side magical creatures. Naturally there are caves and grottos about. Being magical, many are as filled with plants and sunlight as the aboveground. Some creatures shelter here."

She brushed a hand against some leafy, hanging vines to demonstrate.

"So if they're harmless, why did they move us here?" Hermione shook her head, wondering if she had any fairies caught in her hair - She didn't.

Luna affixed her with a strange gaze. "Hermione, none of these creatures are 'harmless'. Nor are any particularly friendly to the mortal races. None of the creatures of this forest are 'safe'. Specific details for handling each race are complex, with many limitations and exceptions, but many creatures, great and small, inhabit this forest, and none of them are to be taken lightly; which is why the forest is off-limits. There are creatures out there that in their own ways are as dangerous as dragons or manticores, many of them made more so by the fact that they look innocent."

Hermione looked flustered. Harry could hardly blame her. She was so often the one offering explanations and answers it had to be a little odd to be the one caught asking questions like this.

Well, she'd only just started Care of Magical Creatures class this year, and even with a full NEWT in that she'd not have the sort of information on these things as the Lovegoods grew up with.

To grant her credit. Hermione did not pitch a fit, as Ron would have, over someone else being the one holding the knowledge on something. Instead she almost visibly seemed to switch into viewing Luna as a professor of her subject, and began treating her as such, sitting up attentively and almost raising a hand to ask. "Could you offer an example?"

Luna nodded regally. "Near the center of this forest is a pond, a beautiful clear lake surrounded by wooden walks and gazebos. It has a boathouse, and a broad grassy lawn, all sheltered behind a high and nearly impassible hedge. But for all its beauty, it is one of the most dangerous sites to humans in the entirety of magical Britain."

"But why?" the brunette's nose wrinkled in puzzlement.

"Because naiads inhabit the lake." Luna supplied calmly. "Lovely human-sized relatives of the fairy they are beautiful, even friendly-seeming. Their lives are tied to the body of water they inhabit, and they cannot leave, but their powers are nearly supreme inside it. Within their pond they could overpower giants or drown merpeople. They would beckon you near the water in order to pull you under and drown you - and no magic could save your life."

"That's so cruel!" Hermione recoiled.

"Not from their perspective." Luna gave a slight shrug. "Naiads, also called water nymphs, are nearly immortal unless they leave their pond. To them your life is so ridiculously short that to kill you is seen as both absurd and funny; no more tragic than squashing a moth. Besides, they have a right to punish trespassers. The island at the center of their pond is a shrine to the Fairy Queen. No mortal is permitted to tread there. I know a story of a Hogwarts headmaster who broke that rule. Considered the most powerful wizard of his age, he was able to bypass the naiad guardians. But the moment his foot touched down on that magic soil, he transformed into a cloud of

dandelion fluff, clothes and all. He scattered on the breeze and has never been seen again."

"Why would he go there?" the puzzled bookworm asked, watching cross eyed as a four inch bright green fairy loitered near her face. "If it's so dangerous, I mean."

Luna plucked a flower off the stone wall and regarded her fondly. "The Fairy Queen is widely considered the most powerful figure in all of fairydom. That headmaster of long ago felt he had a desperate need and went to plead for her assistance. Apparently she was not impressed."

"So the queen of the fairies lives on that little island?" Harry asked, as from the moment Luna'd opened her mouth she'd been saying things Voldemort did not know, and frankly Harry was eager to learn more even as he scanned the little cave they'd all somehow ended up in.

"No. It is merely a shrine to honor her," Luna supplied. "Similar shrines, with their own individual protections and guardians, abound inside this forest."

Hermione was still mentally chewing on earlier statements. "But if this long ago headmaster you spoke of was so powerful himself, why would he go to a fairy for help? Even if she was the most powerful of her kind?"

"The magic of fairies is different than that of humans. Even the weakest of all fairies still has her own magic - something that cannot be said of humans! And they routinely do that which is considered impossible by rules of magic as we know them. For example, pixies fly without wings, while even the most accomplished wizard needs a device to do the same. Roman wizards had a terrible time conquering the Celts, because Celtic ones knew enough fairy lore to be offering Rome continual surprises in their abilities." Luna smiled, trailing her fingers in the current of a tiny stream bubbling down the floor.

"So fairies aren't 'safe'?" Hermione could almost be pictured trying to take mental notes, as she couldn't be rooting around in a bookbag

that wasn't there for parchment and quill she hadn't carried into the forest with her.

Luna looked up as several fairies settled onto her blonde hair. "They aren't out to harm anyone, and they are capable of good deeds. They just won't normally do them without their own reasons. Take brownies for instance. Brownies don't fix things to help people. They fix things because they enjoy fixing things."

At this Harry chimed in with a small tidbit he knew. "There has always been a muggleborn mania to see everything they meet as just another human that thinks and feels and acts just like we do, only it has a warty skin or four legs or whatever. They're not! Everything I've read tells me different species run by different rules, and different things are important to them. Cruelty is a nutrient for goblins, like protein is for us. They CAN'T LIVE without it! Nor do they want to!"

Knowing such things had been one of the secrets of Voldemort's success. He treated creatures, not like PEOPLE would want to be treated, but like THOSE CREATURES wanted to be treated. Often there was a substantial difference.

For instance Giants revered strength. So they wanted to be physically beaten to a pulp before they'd serve anyone. But then they'd do so willingly.

"And service is the same for house elves," Luna agreed. "To deprive them of the right or opportunity to cook or clean or follow orders would slowly but surely starve them to death no matter what they ate. All the magical races have their own rules like that. Creatures get classified as 'demons' when their driving purpose to exist boils down to merely causing destruction to others. Goblins only very narrowly escaped that clause, and many since have speculated they used bribery to do so."

She fixed the Granger girl with her calm gaze, saying, "Humans are a blend of all sorts of things. Most magical creatures, on the other hand, have a clearly dominant few. Fairies are remarkably conceited. Outside of a sanctuary like this one, they won't even let a nonmagical mortal glimpse them. Since they consider looking at themselves the

ultimate delight, they deny that pleasure to others. Most of the nymphs have the same mentality."

Luna smiled more radiantly. "I have to laugh sometimes. Fairies pretend not to care what mortals think of them, but try giving one of them a compliment. She'll blush, and the others will crowd in for their turn. You'd think they'd be embarrassed."

Hermione blinked several times. "So... fairies talk?"

"Not much to humans," Luna allowed, permitting one to land on her palm to preen in its reflection on the side of her ring. "They have a language all their own, although they rarely speak to each other, except to trade insults. Most will never condescend to use human speech. They consider it beneath them. Fairies are vain, selfish creatures."

Harry smiled, nearly crossing his eyes to stare at a fairy perching on the end of his nose so she could stare in her reflection in his glasses. "I think they're pretty."

"They're gorgeous!" the Lovegood girl agreed. "And they can be useful. At home they handle most of our gardening. But safe? Not so much."

Harry goggled, then turned to face Luna, dumbfounded, noting that she now had a small cloud of fairies attending her. A handful were even carefully braiding the girl's hair. "Uh. Fairies garden?"

The blonde presently having her hair done shrugged, setting a small cloud of fairies to flight, before they settled down on her again. "Fairies do have their own magic, and can be remarkably flexible. They most often use it to freshen up wilting flowers or otherwise beautify the areas around them, considering a lovely environment the perfect frame to accentuate their own beauty. But they can transform creatures that displease them, or even hide their own nature and appearance. When they don't wish to be seen they most often disguise themselves as butterflies or hummingbirds, because even in disguise they can't bear to not be beautiful."

"All of this is very well and good," Hermione interjected. "But what I think we ought to be doing is trying to find out why they brought us here, and where 'here' is anyway."

Luna looked up at her calmly. "I believe we are in imminent peril to our lives," she stated in utmost seriousness. Then she gestured to the open mouth of their small cave, which had water up to its lip. "Because that is a naiad lake."

Outside, the sun shone down brightly on the glimmering, clear waters. Faces of beautiful women looked out at them from underneath the surface.

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Author's Notes:

While I'd love to claim credit for the fairy portions, sadly I cannot. They were adapted wholesale with only minor additions and alterations from the novel Fablehaven, which I guess would make this the first Harry Potter/Fablehaven crossover.

But they took this story in the direction I needed it to go.

Chapter Fourteen
by Lionheart

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"Seven of them," Luna commented dryly, having finished counting naiad faces. "That makes this a particularly strong lake. Most that do qualify have only enough mystical energies to support two to four, in some cases five."

Then she looked back from the lake at Harry. "What are you doing?"

"Searching for secret passages," he replied, going over every inch of their small cave carefully. "I noticed that the top of the cave mouth is still within easy reach of the water. So if we try to climb or fly out, they can still grab us as we pass through the opening."

Luna began nodding. "The strength of a naiad is only a little more than human when grabbing at things outside of their lakes, and boats are one of their weaknesses. But you are still quite correct, they could easily pull us down. What about the source of our small breeze?"

"Too small to stick my arm in," Harry replied testily. "First place I checked. The stream comes in from the same place."

"We're trapped?" Hermione looked around in alarm. "I thought you said fairies aren't out to harm anyone?"

"Hermione," Luna sighed, dropping her gaze. "we don't know what brought us here. It could have been anything. We only know fairies found us before we woke up, and that's not surprising since this is one of their refuges."

The bookworm's panic ground to a halt on that observation and the intellectual in her forced its way forward to question, "How do you know this is a fairy refuge?"

"Enchanted stone nine feet thick on every side," Harry grumbled, moving his questing fingers to exploring the ceiling. "An entrance so small only they can use it, an auxiliary entrance guarded by

something so dreadful not even the most desperate predator would try to pass, in case the main entrance gets guarded or blocked up. Fresh air, fresh water, edible flowers on the plants, and magic wards I don't recognize that almost have to be fairy magic... No, it's simple, but Hogwarts is not so well defended. Welcome to your first Fairy Fortress, more commonly called a Fairy Mound. Not many ever get to see inside of one. Fewer still get out to tell about it. If they have more of these I could be totally wrong about the fairy losses to acromantula depredations."

Hermione had started to go through her clothes. "I've lost my wand!" She exclaimed.

"So have we," Luna and Harry chorused despondently. Harry went on to say, "That's the first thing I checked for, and I have more than enough charms on my wand holster to have stopped ordinary loss or theft. Point is, my holster is also missing. So it is no accident we are here and unarmed."

"Fairies might have done that, independent of whatever force moved us here," Luna considered thoughtfully. "This is one of their refuges, and they have a right to feel nervous about armed outsiders of unknown intentions."

Harry placed his hand upon a section of wall and intoned, "Thrice from mine and thrice from thine, and thrice again to unmake nine. Peace! The charm's no more malign."

Nothing happened.

The boy sat down heavily, hanging his head. Luna also looked distressed.

"What happened?" Hermione glanced around, knowing she was missing something and judging from their looks, it wasn't something good.

"The fey love secrets and riddles." Luna mourned. "That used to be a way to bypass a wall of nine. Obviously they changed the answer."

"I found the secret passage," Harry interpreted without looking up. "But the pass code has changed. Not a surprise, the muggles got a hold of that one during the Middle Ages and turned it into a nursery rhyme they taught their children, and then Shakespeare got ahold of it to adapt into one of his plays. That's spread too wide to call it a secret anymore, so obviously they changed it. Pity is, people get inside Fairy Mounds so rarely we had no way of checking that for centuries. Now we know it doesn't work."

Hermione brightened considerably. "So, to escape all we've got to do is answer a riddle? I can do that! Where is it written?"

Harry raised his face to her, and didn't look happy. "Hold your horses, Mione. Don't be angry with me, but to avoid people shouting every answer that pops into their heads, fairy doors lock down on receiving a wrong answer. The new moon will grant us another opportunity, and every new moon beyond that one will reset the lockdown again. But we might be here for quite some time."

"WHAAAT!?" bushy hair stood on end.

"Don't be angry with him!" Luna scolded. "If you met a sphinx, and it asked that age old riddle: What walks on four legs in morning, two legs at midday, and three legs at evening, you would answer: Man, just like everyone would. The same applies here. We had a known answer to a solvable problem. Fey are just trickier than sphinxes, that's all."

"We're going to miss TWENTY DAYS??" Hermione cried, outraged at her own, very accurate, count of days til the next new moon. She was a good student at Astronomy, after all, just like all of her subjects. "That's not fair! We're going to get so far behind in our classes."

Luna pierced the girl with an otherworldly gaze that froze her on the spot. "Twenty days? Yes, that was how long it would be til the next new moon back at the time we presume we entered this cave. Would that we'd be so lucky. Time does not mean the same thing around the fey. The Story of Rip Van Winkle is a true warning."

"You mean the farmer who spent a night bowling and drinking with magical creatures and woke up forty years later? Isn't that a fairy tale? I mean, it goes directly against Throckmorton's seventh law!" Hermione recoiled.

Harry resumed a smile. "Yes, Hermione. Throckmorton is correct. Space can be altered by magic, but time cannot be. However recall you own words: Fairy tale. Do not think that means to wizards what it does to muggles."

Luna also seemed amused. "Time travel is impossible by magic, yes. However didn't I just tell you that fairies routinely perform magic that is impossible by the laws as we know them? It may be impossible, but fairies do it all of the time. It seems almost a game to them, and one they play very well."

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but Harry cut her off. "The Time Turners you and I use. Yes, I know that's going to be your next question. Do you know what makes up the dust they use in Time Turners? Powdered fairy wings. Around seven hundred years ago it was observed that fairies can move through time in ways that mortals don't. Five hundred years ago that was quantified, to an extent, and someone had the bright idea: Hey, you know WE can't do this, but THEY can, so what if we find some way of harnessing their ability, like horses to a plow? And around four hundred years ago those experiments succeeded in inventing the Time Turner."

The boy gave his friend a very sober gaze. "That discovery kicked off a 'Gold Rush', so to speak for fairy wings. Everyone wanted some and went out to find what fairies they could to harvest their wings."

"That led to the virtual extinction of their race outside of sanctuaries like this one," Luna completed softly.

Harry inhaled deeply and sank back against a cushion of moss. "The Ministry came back in the seventeen hundreds with a law passed to make it illegal to hunt fairies or traffic in their wings. That at least stopped the poacher incursions into the Forbidden Forest, and other preserves. But even so it took a while to really take effect. The race has never really rebounded."

Hermione sat back on her hands, humbled by that information.

"So it is entirely possible," Luna conjectured, "For us to get out of this place after what seems like months to us, and discover when we reach society that no time has passed since we entered, or that five hundred years have, or watch ourselves led to this cave by whatever creatures put us in here, or to go so far back in time that we become our own mothers or father. It all depends on whatever games the fairies are playing with us. Now we are within one of their places of power it would be impossible for them to resist doing something to us to amuse themselves."

"So we might be forced to build our own school and rename ourselves Godric, Rowena and Helga," Harry offered with a wry smirk.

"The fey are prone to playing games such as that," Luna softly agreed. "But it is equally possible for us to grow to a ripe old age and after a long and fulfilling life here exit this place on the day after we entered; or to leave it regressed in age to children and find ourselves going to school with the kids or grandkids of the people we saw just yesterday. Unpredictability is one of the unique... charms, of the fey." She finished with a wry grimace, focusing her gaze on Hermione. "And time has virtually no meaning around them. It can flow backwards or forwards, fast or slow, or even sideways sometimes."

"But they do play by rules, even if they are obscure or hard to understand for mortals like us," Harry observed, getting up to his feet and going to the cave mouth over the naiad lake. "And one of the things I'd like to avoid is going asleep in here again. They work most of their mischief on mortals as they are sleeping. So the more times we do that, the more drastic whatever change we eventually face is going to be - Probably."

"Probably?" His brunette best friend stiffened.

"It really is hard to tell for sure," Luna agreed. "Fairies are many things, but do not count predictability among them. Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', was practically a documentary. Misfired

love potions, transformation and so on are light entertainment for the more powerful fey."

"Which makes me very eager to get out of here," Harry admitted.

"Especially before we eat anything," Luna nodded firmly.

Harry perked up at this, checking his potions belt, before sitting down before the two girls and regarding them seriously. "Ok, Luna has just brought up a very real danger. One of the rules fairies live by is that their worst tricks all wait upon some kind of 'agreement' on the part of the recipient, and I use that term very loosely."

"Any kind of acceptance, whether of food, trinket or token qualifies," Luna frowned at herself. "Which meant I was very foolish for having picked a flower, as I now almost certainly qualify. I should have been more careful."

Hermione scooted a little further from the walls in fright.

"However," Harry admitted with a downcast face, before raising it to them again in determination. "I told you both before that I carry many potions. I even gave you a partial list of my medical and weapon-like potions."

"Your other two categories were enhancement and utility potions," Hermione remembered, as if from a favorite teacher's lecture.

Harry was honestly flattered.

"That's right," he nodded. "I don't have much in the way of enhancement potions on hand just yet, as I'd been planning on doing most of those in the form of Everlasting Elixirs that don't wear off."

"What were you going to have?" Hermione interrupted.

He gave her a smile. "Oh, the usual. Memory potions for making it easier to recall things, potions for stimulating mental agility, strengthening solutions for our bodies and wit sharpening potions for our minds. Any great witch or wizard does some measure of that. I'm

lucky in that I could add re'em blood for truly impressive strength. But I was also going to sneak in a beautifying potion for each of us. If you make it in an everlasting elixir, then take only a drop or two a day while you're a growing teenager like us, it takes effect so gradually people think you are just blooming into your own natural beauty."

The two females stared at him in shock, so impressed they couldn't speak.

Hermione blinked several times. "Mother always said the best makeup job is one where no one can be sure you're wearing makeup."

Harry shrugged, but could hardly take credit. That was one of Tom Riddle's tricks, only it had gotten overwhelmed by later dark rituals. "Beauty has a strong effect on the human mind," he agreed. "Pretty people get away with things that ugly people don't. And because this is an 'everlasting' elixir, it grants the kind of beauty that only gets dignified with age."

Both girls turned their heads away to avoid being caught drooling. The sad fact was that most pretty girls went to pieces as they got older, and didn't look very good at all. It was something that no one looked forward to, yet happened far more often than not. Just about any girl could expect to lose her looks sometime around middle age; some sooner, some later.

Harry inhaled to sigh. "But that was something I was working on, not anything I happen to have with me." He leveled a serious look at them both. "However, in my 'utility potion' supply I do have some polyjuice."

Luna gasped. "Harry! That..!"

"It's not that big of a deal," the bushy haired one reassured the blonde. "We took some last year. It worked out fine for Harry and Ron." Then she made a face. "Of course, I made a mistake and took a hair from a cat. Polyjuice was never intended for non-human transformation."

"And that is exactly what scared her," Harry supplied, looking straight at his best friend. "Because transforming into each other isn't going to get us out of this mess. However, if we pluck a hair or two from some fairies we can use their own exit to get out of this place."

Now it was Hermione's turn to go pale. "But! Madam Pomfrey said... it took her WEEKS to undo the partial transformation from me last time!"

Luna swallowed heavily, looking quite distressed. "Let's save that for our last resort, hm? It's better than staying in here for months or possibly centuries, and definitely better than getting drowned by naiads, but not so safe that I'd risk it before checking all other options."

"Agreed," Harry nodded, to both girls' immense relief. But then he brought up a separate issue. "And I'm doubly reluctant to use it, because fairies like to taint food they find on your person. My potions will probably work, but the likely side effects are... well, we could be more than weeks having Pomfrey return us to normal if we choose to get out that way."

The boy leaned back. "Actually, I have enough polyjuice to charge some with doses of our own hair. So, theoretically, we could change into fairies, fly out the long but narrow main entrance they use, then return to normal quickly by drinking the potions charged to change us back into ourselves."

"It reduces our risk somewhat, but it's still risky. Considering that each dose would cross the human/non-human boundary, one going, one coming, stress on our bodies might be more than we could bear. I'd prefer to keep that as an option of last resort," Luna hesitantly allowed.

Harry leaned forward, crossing his legs and sitting Indian style. "Fair enough. But we'll probably want to charge some to return us to ourselves in any case, just as precaution against any other transformations."

"Agreed, but you sound like you had another point?" Hermione asked hopefully as she and Luna both separated out stray hairs to hand to Harry.

He inhaled deeply. "Yes. I do. It's not so much a full option as a possible route to discover one." He reached into his belt and produced two hard candies that looked very much like cough drops - if cough drops could be as brightly and brilliantly colored as the fairies constantly flitting about them.

"Language lozenges?" Hermione asked in puzzlement.

"Fairy language lozenges," Harry agreed. "I have two: my own, and the one I was going to give you on your birthday. But the spells are strong enough on them we could cut a third off of each and each take two thirds of one. The magic could take slightly longer to activate, but we'd all achieve full fluency. The reason I suggest this is because of that passcode I tried to use to open the door earlier. The fey can be tricksters, but they do leave clues about. In our current state we are unliable to recognize them. But if we can read their system of writing we have a much increased chance of finding the new code or solving whatever puzzle could get us out of here intact."

Hermione was about ready to jump for joy, but Luna was already frowning. "The trouble with that course is they are still something edible, thus likely to have been changed as a form of trick." Seeing the other girl slump, hopeless, she quickly added, "Oh! They'll do what they're designed to do, but we could easily get donkey ears out of ingesting them."

"Donkey ears are easy to fix," the bookworm petulantly scolded. "So that's worlds better than being released from this place thirty years into our pasts and becoming our own parents."

"Which the fey are all too liable to do." Harry nodded, wincing. "They've got memory charms that could make it easy to arrange, and that's exactly the sort of thing many of them think is funny."

Luna was also nodding gravely. "I love my father... just not that way. I agree that taking the risk is better than going to sleep in here again,

which would tempt our hosts almost beyond bearing into mischief of that sort."

"The longer we stay here, the more extreme their tricks are liable to be," the bushy haired one quoted from cautions her friends had already given her.

"Actually, strictly speaking, the ordinary variety of fairy surrounding us now is just what I said before: obsessively vain, but not out to do anyone harm." Luna corrected. "It is the stronger sorts, larger, more human-like that we have to fear. But a refuge in a sanctuary is exactly the sort of place to find them, if they could still be found anywhere."

"The words of the guy who wrote Peter Pan come to mind," Harry grinned, getting down on his hands and knees by the lake entrance. "He said Tinkerbell was too small to have more than one feeling at once, and when she was good, she was all good. But when she was bad, she was all bad."

"Honestly, most fairies are stuck on 'conceited' rather than good or bad, but you do make a valid point," Luna allowed.

"What are you doing?" Hermione pressed around to see what Harry was up to.

He'd drawn a sword from a concealed sheath on his body, and was extending the bare blade outside of the large cave entrance, just above the surface of the naiad-populated water. "Trying to see some of what is around this cave, using the blade as a mirror - I figured they won't grab bare steel."

Moments later he withdrew the sword and sat down heavily. "Bad news, girls. I can confirm the existence of wooden walkways and gazebos around the lake - the broad grassy lawn, the hedge, everything. There's even an overgrown island in the center of the lake."

"The Shrine of the Fairy Queen," Luna whispered, frozen in stark terror.

"That's bad." Hermione confirmed.

"I think I'd take being at the heart of a volcano, or raging tribes of cannibals just about any day of the week," Harry acknowledged, before his eyes went terribly wide. "And that only makes this development more chilling."

Pushing at it from below the surface of the water, the naiads had opened up the boathouse and brought forth a wide rowboat, which they guided to the mouth of the cave, grounding it on the sands there.

Luna went from paralyzed in fear to scrambling away from it in stark terror, pressing herself up flat against the far side of the cave from the water, her eyes bulging as she considered this offering.

Hermione had something else to occupy her. "Wasn't that Gryffindor's sword?"

"Yes," Harry nodded, resheathing the weapon where it had been concealed on his body. "And before you ask, yes, I'm still carrying the other artifacts I got from the Founders. Frankly, it had become habit, and I forgot."

Putting the sword away, his robes tore open along a seam, revealing the silver armor he wore concealed.

"That too?" Hermione asked, finding a moment of merriment in teasing him.

"Yes. Although this stuff really ought to have decomposed." Harry tapped his armor several times, yet still found it sound.

"That's because it's living silver," Luna supplied, still pressing herself against the back wall of the cave and staring in fear at the boat the naiads offered. "The ritual to create it is complex, but it involves ramora scales and occamy eggs, both highly magical biological silver."

"Oh?" Harry blinking in surprise at his own suit of armor.

"I thought I overheard someone calling that Goblin Silver?" Hermione mused.

"Goblins stole the techniques for creating it from the dwarves, who originally developed the secret process. There might be more, but I'm having trouble recalling it because at the moment I'm terrified beyond the capacity for rational thought," the blonde girl stated calmly, still staring at the boat.

"Oh," Hermione murmured softly.

What sort of response was there to that?

"Luna, why are you scared of the boat?" she asked.

"It's not the boat. It's that naiads are offering it," she was answered.

Hermione looked back and forth between the boat and the blonde. "But that's good, right? You did say that boats were one of their weaknesses."

"Exactly." Luna nodded, still staring at the conveyance. "Hermione, how many times have you had a vampire corner you, who offered you a cross and wooden stake to wield against him?"

Hermione froze. "That... wouldn't happen."

"Exactly," the blonde nodded, eyes still on the boat. "So if it does, you know that either the item is trapped to not work properly, or that normal rules have gone out the window."

Harry grew sober, and chimed in, "In which case you're even worse off than normal, as knowing the rules is the only kind of safety you can have with magical creatures."

"Uh huh," Luna nodded, still staring at the boat like it was some sort of dangerous wild animal that might leap out of the water and bite her.

Actually, in light of where they were, and Harry's last statement, Hermione spent a moment examining it herself - it just might!

Another patch of cloth disintegrated under Harry's hands, as he gave an experimental tug on one of his sleeves. Grimacing, he intoned, "You know, I have good news and bad news."

"I'd like to hear some good news," Hermione chimed.

"Even bad news could only be better than that boat," Luna mumbled ominously.

"Right." Harry inhaled deeply. "Well, the good news is that I've identified the mischief that was worked on us last night, I think. Since fey creatures seem to stick by a rule of 'one prank per opportunity' if we can get out of here before we fall asleep again, we ought to be able to get out of here in our own time period, and not rub shoulders with King Arthur, or whatever."

"That's nice," Hermione agreed, feeling great relief over that problem.

"The bad news," Harry continued. "Is that our clothes are disintegrating."

Hermione jerked in surprise and one of her socks came apart, exploding into tatters under the pressure of staying around her perfectly normal leg.

"It seems they did not survive the ritual last night," Harry continued in a monotone. "Or rather I should say they suffered some overload damage, but even so they couldn't, shouldn't be decomposing this fast. So the time magic we've been fearing was probably used to speed up their decay. On the plus side, when you consider what they are capable of, the prank our last sleep session was something fairly mild. Embarrassing rather than debilitating."

"Humiliating mortals is sport for most types of fey," Luna almost seemed relieved by this revelation. Leaning forward she left a large patch of lint fluff where she'd pressed herself so hard against the cave wall.

Hermione pursed her lips. "Do you mean to say that if we stay in this cave any longer, say long enough to go to sleep again, that not only might we be joining Buck Rogers in the 25th Century when we do eventually escape, but we are liable to be NAKED!?"

"That does appear to be an accurate summation, yes," Harry acknowledged, before he met her eyes with a wan smile and repeated Luna's phrase. "Humiliating mortals is sport for most types of fey."

The daughter of dentists scowled fiercely, holding out her hand. "Gimme that language lozenge! We are going to spend a half an hour hunting for runes, and if that doesn't work..."

She reached out a hand and somehow yanked a small tuft of hair off a fairy when she'd never been able to catch one before. "You are going to charge some polyjuice, Harry!"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

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Author's Notes:

This is one of those points when an author has to sit back and think 'There are SOO many possible places to take this story from here!' I mean, literally anything can be possible at this point, some of the potentials the characters already described, and many of them have never before been explored to my satisfaction.

There's an almost irresistible draw to that. Yes, some of those have been tried before, but never once have they been done RIGHT!

Chapter Fifteen
by Lionheart

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"NOTHING!" Harry's outraged cry split the air of the cave. "That shouldn't be possible! Fairies are ALWAYS leaving clues about! It's part of their NATURE!"

Luna redirected her gaze to the rowboat held by naiads, still passively waiting for them to approach. "Yes, well, that does not appear to be the only rule that has gone out the window."

The boy blanched. "Good point." He drew in a deep breath. "Well, then are we out of options enough to use the polyjuice?"

They had called for Dobby, but either he couldn't hear or couldn't enter.

The pair looked over to Hermione, who'd calmed a great deal from her earlier bout of temper, and was sitting in a corner of the cave using a bone needle and strands of her own hair to sew flowers and leaves together into an apron to replace her rapidly disintegrating clothes. That she had given up on the search for hidden writings before them spoke more about the desperation of their search than any hope of success.

If she had given up that's only because there were no other options left to try. If there was still a chance to find written clues, Hermione would still be looking for them. Ergo, they'd exhausted all real possibility of finding any and were now running on sheer emotional energy.

"It seems so odd, but many aspects of this are incomprehensible," Luna agreed. "It grows curiouser and curiouser all the time."

Harry snorted. "Sorry. In that moment you sounded a bit like Alice."

The blonde looked around herself, finding in her terror a moment of amusement. "Well, we seem to have found our own rabbit hole."

He looked at her, shocked. "I'm surprised you know that book."

"Don't be. It was about my grandmother. Alice later married a Lovegood."

"Why am I not surprised?" the boy wondered.

Hermione had to stifle a giggle, proving that she was listening in.

Luna went on as though she wasn't aware of it. "Gateways to Other Realms do exist, but they have become scarcer and scarcer. Wizards blame muggles and the spread of their technology, but really it is the Ministry of Magic closing all of them they can find - too dangerous, they say. Not governable by them is the true reason," she quipped. "This area was once thick with magic lakes and streams, enchanted islands and fortresses. So many in fact that it was far more famous for its magic places than its magic people, except for Merlin of course. They have never been fully mapped. It's impossible, as too many of them move around, or are disguised or protected one way or another. But the Ministry of Magic has labored tirelessly since the creation of the Statute of Secrecy to shut down all the ones they couldn't control. What do you think they have a Department of Mysteries for?"

Hermione stopped what she was doing to look at her seriously. "I was under the impression they had it to research new magic. That's what is says in..." she looked at the blonde's expression and paused. "Was that not the case?"

Luna shook her head. "No. Sadly not. The purpose of that department is to isolate and contain all of the things our current Ministry of Magic cannot control or understand. Research is a side goal, but the only publicly admitted one. They don't want most of the magical public to know they are effectively working to reduce the amount of magic in the world. But to their minds if it cannot be hidden from muggles, then it must be destroyed. And anything they do not control could, in theory, be found by muggles. Simple men have passed barriers seasoned wizards could not cross before."

"How do you know this?" the bookworm whispered, looking pale.

"My grandmother, Alice Lovegood? They have her in there."

Harry blinked at the hard undertones to Luna's soft voice. "You mean she is an Unspeakable? I thought they had oaths to stop them from talking about their work."

Now Luna looked angry. "No. She is not an Unspeakable. She is their victim. Once they'd finally heard of her story as one of the last recorded travelers to return from a journey to an Other Realm they sought her out and took her from her family to isolate and imprison her, presumably so they can study her - meaning, of course, performing all sorts of gruesome experiments."

She turned a hard gaze to Harry. "The acts they perform there are simply horrid, or, to put it another way, unspeakably vile. That is where those who work there get their name - not out of any great secrecy, but because what they do down in those secret chambers is so revolting and ugly no one would dare to speak of them. You ought to know, Voldemort was one for a while."

"Yes, I do." The boy nodded, looking guilty. "And sadly that is where he picked up most of his more vile habits. That's why I was shocked when you admitted they had your grandmother there. I thought you were saying she was one, and I couldn't picture it of one of your family."

In answer to Hermione's wide eyes, Luna calmly continued to explain, "Look it up in any dictionary, and you'll find that unspeakable, in general, means either indefinable or atrocious. More often than not it is the latter one, granting the word a very negative flavor overall. Some examples where people might most often say 'unspeakable' are for things like: 'atrocious taste', 'abominable workmanship', 'an awful voice', 'dreadful manners', 'a painful performance', or 'terrible handwriting'; 'an unspeakable odor came sweeping into the room', and so on. All those things might be defined as 'unspeakable'. And what they are doing to my grandmother are unspeakable tortures. But you do enough unspeakable things and you become an unspeakable person. And if enough people like you have your job, that becomes the job description."

Luna's voice was calm as anything even while her audiences' faces contorted in horror. She calmly raised an eyebrow and went on, "Then you make them stop telling people outside of the department what they do, and they forget why they gave you that name in the first place. Humans don't like to face things that are unpleasant, so they ignore or forget as often as they can."

"How do you know what they are doing to her?" Hermione whispered softly.

Luna sighed. "Because, among the many gifts she received on her many trips to Wonderland, my grandmother became a telepath. She is able to send us messages from time to time in her more lucid periods, between tortures."

Hermione looked soft and white and too scared to move.

Harry rubbed his brow underneath a conjured set of glasses. "It has long been my assertion that the ministry is filled, almost without exception, with incompetent morons striking for idiot and failing the tests. How they get ANYTHING done is beyond my understanding. But why is it that the only things they can do with any efficiency are all EVIL?"

Luna looked at him oddly, yet directly. "Because Dumbledore is in charge there and it takes on the same pattern he has imposed here at school? The good and respected purposes that institution was brought about to fill it cannot because it is too busy performing the vile deeds he'd rather it do?"

"Yes, that's right." Harry smiled wanly at himself in unhappy mockery. "The same man who authored my childhood to be the stuff of nightmares, and who makes our education a sham, is also the one who is in control of our Ministry. How could I have forgotten?"

They all spent an unhappy moment pondering that.

"Laying all the treacheries of Dumbledore aside for a moment, we still have to get out of here," Harry reminded. "No matter what vulgar

things he's got the Ministry up to, they won't matter to us if we're displaced by a century or two. And I don't know about the rest of you, but I am getting tired."

The girls looked at each other in shock.

Harry's last shoe finally gave up and fell off his foot in tatters.

By this point they were already wearing little more than rags. The slightest tug or pull would shred the clothes they were wearing, and most of them had acquired enough rents or holes the girls were in danger of indecency.

Harry wasn't, because he wore neck to toe armor, with the helmet in his pouches, but he wasn't looking forward to having the last of his wardrobe fall to pieces. Metal links might conceal, but they could also pinch tender flesh like nothing else. So once the last of the clothes he was using for padding inside came apart, he'd either bleed from pinching or submit to nudity.

Frankly he was not looking forward to being forced into such a situation.

"Under ordinary circumstances, the polyjuice experiment you propose doing is stupidly dangerous," Luna sighed, hefting a little shrug of her shoulders. "However these circumstances are far from ordinary, and considering our alternatives it may actually be our best option."

"How dangerous is it?" Hermione looked at her friends and asked quietly.

Harry sighed. "Well, you already know polyjuice is not intended for nonhuman transformations. When you used a hair from a cat you only partially changed because the potion didn't have the power to move you all of the way."

"But fairy magic is all about change," Luna continued softly. "Most of the art of Transfiguration as it is taught today is actually inherited from the Celts, who were far superior to the Romans in that area because of their study of fairies. About the most advanced Greco-Roman

expression of that art was that performed by Circe, who changed men to pigs and back again - and even she was more a student of fairy lore on that subject than other Greeks."

"Flesh to flesh transfiguration is actually not as hard as some of the other materials they have us using, even as early students," Harry admitted. "To give you an idea, most magical cultures had examples of people who could transform themselves into animals and back again."

Luna fixed her with an otherworldly gaze. "But only one could teach students how to change matchsticks to needles and back again, beetles into buttons, or other lessons we have already performed. Only one culture had that deep a knowledge of change, and they got it from the fey. We are lucky to have inherited that skill from those Romans who were so impressed by them that after they defeated the Celts they then studied those arts from them."

Harry was rubbing his eyes again. "So you get an idea of what a powder keg it is we are igniting when we take something designed for change, and charge it with actual substance from the body of a fairy creature. It would not be too extreme to compare it to throwing sticks of TNT onto a campfire. There is no question it will work. There is also no question but what we are unleashing something far beyond our control here."

Harry paused before continuing. "The only matter under debate is 'can we survive this'. And the answer to that would almost certainly be 'No' if the fey weren't also so unpredictable."

"So there is definitely a very slim chance we'll survive," Luna confirmed, before halting herself. "As what is the problem."

Harry nodded. He started speaking, then stopped himself. A full and detailed account of their dangers was enough to turn hair white, and wouldn't be useful in any case. Scaring themselves out of their wits could only make their problems worse. Best to summarize.

He rubbed his temples. "It's like a strange game of Russian Roulette. We could be perfectly fine. There is also a chance that we'll die.

However, as the fey are generally inoffensive it is not so much our lives on the line, although those are most certainly at risk, as what form our bodies eventually wind up in. To 'survive' in this context means getting out of here and back to school in a form that can eventually be returned to normal."

"And while that is far from impossible, it is not likely either," Luna supplied before rushing ahead to reassure, "Having polyjuice charged to return us to ourselves multiplies our chances for a correct resolution, to where it is not unlikely we will be able to return to our birth forms, and even more likely we will achieve at least a close approximation thereof."

"But it does magnify our other risks," Harry admitted, suppressing a groan. "The shock stands a decent chance of killing us if we try to return that way. However if we can arrange to do it in the hospital wing Madam Pomphrey can almost certainly save us from that."

Hermione visibly thought this over, and after several more moments to process what they'd just said, she looked up at them. "This is also the only way I'm ever likely to see my family again, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, yes," Harry reluctantly agreed.

"Our list of options is rather thin," Luna admitted. "And whatever the risks of doing this are, we face all those same risks to just as great a degree by staying, with the added dangers of temporal displacement on top of them." Almost recovering her normal self, she fixed them both with an otherworldly smile. "Isn't it great how desperation can redefine your concept of danger?"

Just at that moment the fabric of Harry's robes failed and tore themselves off his shoulders, leaving him standing there in nothing but his potions belt and silver armor. Thankfully his inner wear was not as stressed, so he still had some padding between himself and getting pinched between metal links.

Watching their clothing rotting from magical overload accelerated by fairy magic reminded her they were under a delicate time crunch, and Hermione sighed, pulling on her apron of leaves before the rest of her

own robes fully decayed off her body. "Well, I can see no other way. We ought to take the polyjuice to change into fairies. At least that gets us out of here and back to Hogwarts, where we can call on other resources."

"Agreed," Harry nodded, before steeling himself. "I'll go first. That way if it fails you two can explore other options."

Luna calmly shook her head. "No, because we'd have no way of knowing if you succeeded or not. We'd merely sit here and worry. Best if we all try to go at once. That way if one has trouble, at least there is a chance the others can offer some form of help."

No longer speaking, Harry raised up three bottles of polyjuice and added the hairs Hermione had stolen earlier. Too fine even to see individually, the hairs caused the most dramatic reactions in the potions, causing effervescence and multiple color shifts that didn't truly settle down.

Watching the bottles bubble, froth, foam and fizz like agitated soft drinks did not inspire any degree of confidence. That it never stopped, nor did the colors settle down from their constant shifting, didn't help.

"You've got the return potions ready?" Hermione nervously licked her lips, glancing up at him before returning to staring at the frothing multicolor potion she'd been given.

"Already charged those before we started to search." Harry waited a second before admitting, "Actually, I charged three sets. That way we have spares in case of breakage or loss. I figure we can each carry potions charged for everyone in our group so there is no one failure point. You'd all hate it if we got out, but only you returned to Hogwarts while I got eaten by an augury or something - especially if I was the one carry all our potions."

Luna was nodding. "And if anyone goes mad and drops or dumps out all of the potions she is carrying, she'd still very much like a chance to return to normal. So we each carry a full set, so if any one of us retains her mind, we can all have a chance to be restored."

"We'd also have multiple chances to return to normal should we all get out and all of our polyjuice survive," Harry concluded. "We should also carry out spare hairs, wrapped around our bodies, so that leaves open a chance for Madam Pomphrey to think up something we might not have."

He wordlessly handed around those bottles. The girls accepted them soberly. Then, as is she could no longer bear to consider the risks, Luna downed her fairy-charged polyjuice potion in a single swift motion, the others followed her example a heartbeat later.

Almost immediately each youth had disappeared in a cloud of sparkles, the last remnants of their disintegrating clothes falling into heaps around them.

"I can't believe I let myself get so stressed I forgot about that part," Harry spoke from within the chestplate of his former armor.

"How are we going to carry out our return polyjuice potions?" Hermione's voice came from the puddle of her clothes, topped by the flowers and leaves of her makeshift apron.

"We aren't. Not by physical power anyway," Harry regretfully answered. "The bottles are each larger than us." Poking his head out, he looked rather regretfully around the cave. "Likewise, there is no way for me to retain the sword of Gryffindor, or the other artifacts I carry. But they won't be the first treasures lost to a fairy mound."

A flower detached itself from a wall and gently drifted down, changing as it fell into a beautiful yet simple dress that settled onto and around Luna as she emerged from her own pile of former clothes.

"Change them," Luna ordered firmly. "You forget what we are now. Change the objects you want to carry out. Just pretend you have your wands."

Pausing a moment to consider, blushing at how they'd missed that after so long a discussion of fairies having such great powers of transformation, both her companions did so, casting shrinking and

featherweight charms on their belongings, after having transfigured new clothes out of flowers and leaves.

They soon regretted doing so.

"Ow!" Harry doubled over in pain.

"That... hurts," Hermione cramped up rather badly herself.

"It can't be helped," Luna was shaking her head. "The system shock of our transformation was going to hurt in any case, it's just that it's getting to us slightly sooner now for having used fairy magic ourselves. And it will only get worse, so we'd best be on our way."

Nodding their agreement, in too much pain to speak, the other two flew up to the narrow opening that meant their escape. But Harry was in so much pain that he missed it, and smacked facefirst into the wall, while Hermione was so dizzy that she saw four openings to the little exit tunnel, and fluttered about trying to make sense of which one was real.

After much fumbling about the trio finally managed to get into the tunnel, but their strength was failing as rapidly as if they were bleeding to death. No one spoke of it, but they all knew what was going on. About halfway out a tunnel that seemed interminably long the shock of their transformation had exhausted what was left of their strength and they could no longer move.

The three polyjuiced fairies settled to the bottom of the passage, unable to fly any longer, and the stream that ran along the bottom of that tunnel obligingly carried their limp bodies back down its length and back into the cave again. But it did not stop there.

Exhausted, yet aware, the three students allowed themselves to be carried by the running water because they had no choice in the matter. Their bodies were exceptionally lightweight, so floated like leaves upon the water. But the stream did not end in the cave, and soon they got carried out toward the pond. Seeing they were helplessly approaching the realm of the naiads, Luna gasped out, "Harry, I love you. I just want you to know that before we die."

The boy was so weak it felt like strangling himself to spare the breath to answer, but answer he did. "Yeah. I was willing to marry you, but I love Hermione so much I was having second thoughts."

Unable to spare breath, and unsure what to answer, Hermione's shock saved her the confusion of trying to formulate a response just then.

Luna was the first to be swept by the small stream out onto the surface of the pond. Seeing a pale hand coming for her, she closed her eyes and waited for her doom, only to be surprised yet again by the improbable changing of the rules as she knew them, as the naiad to seize her kept her above the surface of the water. Resisting the temptation to drown her, the water nymph instead took Luna gently in hand and sped swiftly away across the lake, soon followed by two of her sisters bearing Hermione and Harry.

When they were deposited safely on the surface of the island and received no harm her surprise was complete.

"Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," she cocked out a soft whisper, amused that everything she knew had just been invalidated.

"Don't tell me Dorothy going to Oz was a true story, as well." Hermione grumbled, no longer feeling it was funny.

"Alright. I won't," Luna replied cheerfully. "But if you ever want to read my great aunt's diaries they were far more complete than the muggle books."

Both other kids boggled. However, in moments they had strength enough to stand.

"Don't be deceived, we're all still in just as much shock as before," Harry told them as they all wobbled to their feet. "But you can give even fatally ill patients enough drugs to get them on their feet, and something on this island is rejuvenating to our current fairy natures."

"That would be in keeping with it being a shrine to the Fairy Queen," Luna agreed, pointing a short distance inland underneath the sheltering canopy of shrubs that from this angle rose over their heads like a tremendous forest.

At their feet was a path of small colored stones, winding beside a small trickle of water that made for a tiny stream.

"Follow the yellow brick road?" he asked with an unstable grin.

"Only about one stone in seven is any kind of yellow," Luna disapproved, as they all suited actions to words and began following the path up from the lake. The island was only about seventy paces across for a human, but for a group of inch-high fairies in their weakened condition it felt like a substantial march to cross the few yards they had to go before bushes obscured the surface of the lake and a small shrine hove into view.

There was a two inch high statue, perfectly detailed, standing upon a small pedestal before a silver bowl that was about palm sized for a human, big enough that all three could have bathed in it at the size they were now.

"So what happens now?" Harry asked, leaning heavily on a twig he'd taken to using as a walking stick.

"I am glad you asked."

The words were not audible, but they struck in their minds with such a forceful impression that the trio gasped. An aromatic breeze drifted over the island. It smelled of rich soil and new blossoms, with just a hint of the sea.

The trio looked up to see the statue smiling down on them when it most certainly hadn't had that expression before.

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Author's Notes:

Yes, this particular sequence has taken a very long time to get through, but you just don't convince bright, skilled people to stumble into bad situations quickly. Or if you do it's not believable.

And, well, since talking to the Fairy Queen is tantamount to suicide, nobody's ever done it and lived (or at least if they have it's not been recorded for fear of encouraging more people to try)... that's sort of a bad situation. And, well strong, intelligent, thinking characters try to resist anything they see as instant death.

So getting them to do it, while leaving them their wits, takes some doing.

Oh, and before anyone asks, the naiads had been commanded by the Queen to bring them, unharmed, before her. You'll see why later. This chapter sort of overflowed, so loads of explanation got pushing into the next one.

Chapter Sixteen
by Lionheart

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The trio stared a moment in silence at the Fairy Queen shrine.

"That's still not her," Luna whispered. "Just a statue. However, things act... oddly around the fey. Sometimes more strange than even wizards know how to cope with."

"You are in no danger. You were brought here under my protection," the non-voice continued. "Invitation is the only way to survive coming to one of my shrines. No mischief was worked on you. Nor would your clothes have been destroyed, save for the fact that in the ritual you performed the mortal dyes used to color them became an acid eating away at the cloth."

"But why bring us here? I don't understand," Hermione declared.

The indefinable presence seemed to gather itself before the non-voice gave her answer. "As you know, my race is nearly destroyed, hunted virtually to extinction by wizards who sought to use us as components. I need heroes to save them, to go back and prevent our destruction. You three were chosen, and you needed my help as much as I needed yours."

The three were stunned to silence by that simple phrase. Undaunted, the undefinable mental voice of the queen continued on.

"When my subjects found you, you were all in quite a predicament, having unwisely combined a number of things that didn't belong to your little ritual."

"So the cloth and things got us into trouble?" Hermione asked, sitting down rather heavily as it took too much effort to stand.

"No," they heard a trill of musical laughter from the voice. "The cloth was well considered, aside from those dyes on what you were wearing. No, you rather unwisely carried in a number of powerful

artifacts that had their own influences and powers. All those would have caused you quite a number of problems were they not overridden by an even greater one. I don't believe you meant to, but you released the powdered wings of many thousands of my servants into your little brew."

Harry clutched at the chain on his neck, lifting out the Time Turner to find that, while the gold parts were fine, the glass had somehow disappeared and released the powder within. He groaned and sank his head into his hands. "The Time Turners! Nothing not organically produced could survive the ritual! So the glass disintegrated, releasing all those fairy wings into the cauldron with us! THOUSANDS of fairy wings in a ritual designed for CHANGE! It's a wonder any of us survived!"

"Yes," the non-voice tinkled. "I don't blame you for their deaths. I can sense they happened long before any of you were born, nor do their spirits cry out to me against you. But the introduction of so much fairy magic to your cauldron would surely have destroyed you."

"We were fools to have entered fully equipped and clothed. There is a reason why our ancestors performed so many of their most powerful rituals naked. It reduces the variables." Luna softly commented.

"How did the gold parts survive?" Hermione had retrieved and was looking at her own incomplete Time Turner necklace. All of its gold parts had survived, only the glass and powder was missing.

"Gold is an exception to most magical rules. That's part of what makes it so valuable," Luna instructed. "And why it gets used in so many artifacts of power. Although I see the gems did dissolve." She fingered an empty socket on the hilt of Harry's sword where one of the jewels used to be.

Harry'd fallen to his knees in shock, and was trembling. "Thousands of fairy wings. We were concerned about throwing sticks of dynamite on a campfire, when it turns out we'd just survived ground zero of a nuclear blast."

"Not entirely," the queen's non-voice impressed upon their minds. "You were all set to disintegrate like the clothes you were wearing. So I had you brought to one of our sanctuaries to stabilize. My daughters might have succeeded in their efforts to save you had you not woken up and begun to work further damage upon yourselves; taking a fairy lozenge and drinking polyjuice were both ill considered moves. As overloaded as you'd begun, even the lozenge was able to push you over that border again."

"We did not feel we had much choice at the time," Harry groaned, "being unaware of our protected status and considering ourselves in grave danger."

"So what happens now?" Hermione demanded. "Do we just disintegrate?"

"Yes, that would normally be the case," the fairy queen's mental voice impressed upon their minds. "Thrice now you have crossed the border, taking in more fairy power than mortal forms can stand without destruction. Once was perfectly bad enough, twice compounded the disaster, and three times made it irreversible and sealed your fate. However, I still need you. So I am willing to exert myself on your behalf, if you will in turn agree to be bound to my purpose."

"Can you be more specific?" Hermione questioned while her two companions were groaning over the scope of their disaster.

"What more do you want to know?" came the mental reply.

"Two things," the bookworm continued in a businesslike tone of voice. "The first is, what you expect us to do for you? And the second is how can you even save us? I thought you'd said the disaster was irreversible."

The teens rubbed their noses at the sudden sense of the aromatic scents giving off a distinct tinge of laughter, and smelling giggles was something far outside anything they'd previously experienced.

"The first is answered simply enough. Live a fruitful life. Resist evil. Give more than you take. Help others do likewise. The rest will take care of itself. I will have the odd mission for you to do every now and again to correct a few problems and preserve our race, but nothing too onerous. And I honestly expect you to gain more out of doing them than I shall by having them done."

"And the second?"

"It gets a bit complicated. To give you a very simplified account, a powerful ritual or other endowment of magic can be compared to putting on a suit of clothes, or a jewel. Although you've put on something you can't take off, and it is too strong for you, so it is killing you. Like if you'd chosen to put on a trinket made out of acid, or poisonous, your bodies simply cannot bear the strain of as much fairy magic as you've infused into yourselves, accidentally or not."

"I think I can picture that," the bookworm nodded.

"The solution," came the reply of the Fairy Queen, "Is to give you new bodies."

"I'm sorry. What?" Hermione blinked several times.

"The solution," the non-voice repeated to all of them, including the now stunned Luna and Harry, "Is to give you new bodies. And the only bodies that can bear as much fairy energy as you've given yourselves are fairy bodies."

The trio had a great deal of nothing to say about that.

They could scent more laughter. "Think of it this way: A person is composed first of a spirit. This is the part that does all of the thinking and feeling and remembering. All the things you think of when you think of yourself are in that part. You have seen ghosts. They are just as much people as when they were alive. If you'd known them, you could even say they were the same people, just without bodies. That brings us to the next part, the bodies. They do all of the touching, lifting, carrying, eating and bearing babies and so on. The mechanical functions of life are all in there. And the last is the clothes, so to

speak, which in this case I am using as a mirror to reflect the changes wrought upon you, magical rituals and such. And, while far from a perfect example, it will do.

"When something gets transfigured, it is neither the body nor the spirit that changes. A man is still a man, even after a spell turns him to stone or into a horse, or what have you. He is just as easily changed back again, and is just the same person as before, because what he really was underneath all that never changed. You only added a mask on top of that for a short while, made him look or act differently. That is why I call this part clothes, because they can be so easily taken off and put back on again, most of the time, without the least bit of change to the essential parts underneath. So you cannot graduate students by transfiguring them all into Dumbledore, as none of what really makes that man who he is carries over. It's only a costume, like if you each decided to trade school robes it would not grant you each others skills or grades. So if you transfigure something into a fire crab shell and try to use that as if it were a fire crab shell, the magic will fail because it has none of the essential properties of a fire crab shell. That's only an outfit another object has on to look like one. That's also why no one can transfigure themselves a year younger every birthday and live forever."

"Alright, I think I understand that part," Hermione began nodding.

"To continue our example, you have donned an article of clothing you cannot take off, namely all of the fairy magic you've absorbed. There are bodies that can bear that amount of that type of magic, they just aren't human bodies, and I can change the body while retaining both clothes and spirit."

"So we're going to be a couple inches tall for the rest of our lives?" the girl timidly surmised.

Once more they could scent her laughter. "No! Not at all, my dear girl. There are plenty of fairy creatures of a size with humans, and considering the level of power you've absorbed it would have to be one of the larger forms anyway - the smaller fey would no more be able to handle it than you are now. So it would be unfair in the

extreme to change you thus without saving you from the overload, as such a change is intended to do."

The trio all breathed heartfelt sighs of relief.

"Will we look like ourselves?" Harry asked.

"Somewhat," the mental voice of the indefinable presence impressed upon their minds. "It hardly matters in any case, as you've absorbed so much of our magic it would be a taxing effort to deprive you of the gift of being a metamorph. So should you drink those potions you've prepared to teach you how to assume your old forms it should be no effort at all to pass yourselves off as you once were. Or even each other, if you are of a mind to."

"That could be amusing," Luna offered, resuming some of her non scared-to-death personality.

The others could already see her thinking of naughty possibilities.

"What?" she responded. "I have every intention of being married to Harry. I know he doesn't love me as much as Hermione, I've known that all along. So naturally I must be willing to share."

Tiny, two-inch tall Hermione (they looked oddly like themselves, in spite of being only inches high and winged - not something polyjuice was supposed to do, but what was regular about all of this?) turned bright red and shouted, "LUNA! That's just not DONE! It's called adultery!"

Then she shrank in on herself a bit, glanced at Harry, turning away blushing an even brighter shade of red.

The indefinable non-voice began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Hermione looked up to ask.

Harry coughed into his fist. "Um, Hermione? This is the Fairy Realm. It's led in part by OBERON! One of the most famous philanderers of all time."

The bookworm rolled her eyes, mumbling, "Of COURSE there are no rules against polygamy!"

"And, as fairy creatures, we would naturally fall under their rules for that sort of thing." Luna concluded serenely. "The wizarding world, however, is... different, and they may be difficult."

"Enough of that, for now," Harry waved it all away. "We have more immediate things to be talking over."

"How did you find us?" Hermione questioned aloud to the voice.

"We've been on the lookout for some time for something to save us from the menace of those giant spiders." The Queen answered frankly. "Then we happened upon you empowering yourselves with the strength of fire. Fairies can take advantage of rituals meant to help humans. They are normally so small they draw off only a tiny fraction of the power to get the full effect themselves, so you normally wouldn't have noticed, and it seemed such a perfect remedy for our immediate dangers. Affected fairies would, like you, be immune to fire and could cast small flame spells (like to burn out spider webs that might have trapped them). Still, in sufficient numbers they could drain even the most powerful rituals if they didn't also tend to contaminate potions like you were simmering in with tiny portions of their own power. Normally this is so small it can be ignored. But in sufficient numbers it could have put you in almost as much danger as you were already."

"So your fairies encountered us simmering and helped themselves to our labors?" Hermione asked, unable to believe her ears. "How many did so?"

"Many thousands, but that wouldn't have changed a bit what you'd already done to yourselves adding all of those fairy wings." There came a pause in the mental voice of the Queen. "How much do you know of the properties that you were assuming, if I may ask?"

"Very little, I'm afraid," Harry admitted, shaking his head.

A spicy scent blew in on the breeze, before the Queen began to lecture.

"Fire is the only Living Element: It eats, breathes, grows and reproduces. It can also die. None of that is true for any other element. While not actually alive, fire comes the closest of all non-living things. Actual life is composed of all four elements; earth and water comprise the body, air sustains it, but it is fire that animates it, often described as 'the spark of life.' All elements make for wonderful servants, but terrible masters. Letting them get out of hand is always destructive. Adding extra of an element to an already living thing is one of the most terrifying, dreadful, and yet beautiful things possible in magic, and usually only seen in nymphs. Your Goblet, however, makes this possible to other creatures. Do you know anything of that artifact?"

"Again, very little," he once more admitted.

"One of the properties of the Goblet of Fire is to bind fire-based creatures to the will of the one performing a certain ritual. At maximum power this is even sufficient to bind a phoenix. Since anyone can use the Goblet in this way, the most evil creature alive could bind a phoenix to his service. That is how your current Headmaster bound the bird he calls Fawkes to his bidding."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Is there a way to break that binding?"

"Of course!" A breeze blew the bushes, somehow causing a tinkling of bells. "All magical bindings can be broken, even the bonds of a dryad to her tree, though some are more difficult than others. In this case it is easier than the rest, as what that cup binds it can also release. I will show you how to use the goblet to set that phoenix free."

"Thank you," the trio spoke earnestly.

"Fawkes is one of three irreplaceable treasures currently bound to your Dark Headmaster. Others he could substitute in other ways. But three are without any peer or adequate replacement. They are: Fawkes, Sybil Trelawney, and Hogwarts itself. His worldly power and offices are effectively interchangeable and could be compensated for

or replaced if lost. But those three provide him powers it is not possible for him to get any other way."

"Trelawney?" the trio spoke again, this time in disbelief.

"She is a true oracle, although her gift has been damaged almost irreparably by the machinations of your Headmaster. That does not prevent him from using spells to tap her gift to his benefit. While he has her under his control he is effectively unstoppable. There is no secret he cannot pry, no plan he cannot thwart, and nothing he cannot destroy. Without her, he would be forced to rely on his own wisdom, which has limits, though few."

Harry slumped prone, breathing heavily. "Frankly, I'd be satisfied if I could just get away from him. I do not seek his destruction."

"Then you must start," the Queen snapped, startling them all. "Harry, the Headmaster seeks to use you as though you were a potion ingredient. He has your whole life planned out, where, after endless suffering and misery, you die in a moment of great self-sacrifice, granting your mother's precious protection to himself and those he intends to use as cronies, most of your worst enemies among them. He has never asked your permission, nor will he. He intends to steal your mother's gift and spread it around among himself and the staff and students of Hogwarts, after allowing Voldemort to clear out all of the annoying mudbloods, of course. He will do anything to bring this to pass, including destroying your mind, if necessary. In fact, he has Snape already preparing plans to do just that to you, under guise of special lessons. You must destroy Dumbledore, or be destroyed by him. He will not permit any other option. And, as my champion, I prefer it be you who be victorious."

Harry was too shocked to form a return statement.

The Queen continued instructing, this time gently, "Dumbledore, from his youth, has always believed in the innate superiority of wizards over muggles. Since your birth, he has dreamed of creating a new breed of wizard armed with Lily's protection - so finally there will be PROOF that pure-blood matters most of all! Because those descended from the ones he sacrifices you for will have a layer of

protection the filthy mudbloods do not. Ironical, isn't it, that it is the gift of a 'filthy mudblood' that he intends to steal to use as his justification that only purebloods are fit to rule?"

Now all three children were too shocked to speak.

"Enough. Time grows short," the non-voice impressed upon their minds. "You perish and waste away in front of me. It is not enough to make you merely fairy-struck, as most of Luna's family have been, or fairy-kind, as our rare champions often are. No, you must become fully fey. I shall include a special, secret means of absolute defense against legilimency, so that outsiders do not learn the secrets of the fairy realm from your minds."

A shower of dew appeared in mid-air over the small bowl set before the dias on which stood the simple statue that represented the Fairy Queen. "Climb into the waters and rest. You shall be remade, your spirits housed in new bodies. They will be patterned after your old ones, worry not."

"Can you send us out the day we started?" Harry asked as the trio moved to obey the command. "And, could you let us continue our triple-day pattern in spite of not having Time Turners anymore?"

"Hush now," the Queen instructed, as the trio lay back against the inward sides of her bowl. "You know where more of those devices can be obtained, and have the skills to seek them. If I were to set you in a temporal pattern you would likely never break it. I shall set you back to the day you began your ritual, and grant you until Winter Solstice to complete your first mission: to deprive Dumbledore of Sybil Trelawney. Bring her to this pond, dose her with a potion you shall find on the shores when you return. Please hurry, as the longer your enemy possesses her the more of your secrets he knows."

That was the last the children heard before sinking off into sleep.

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When they woke up, resting under those bushes around the shrine, they were full size once more, although it was clear they were fairies,

not human. The colors of their bodies were too vibrant to be real. Luna's hair was yellow, no longer blonde, but the vivid, shocking yellow of a daffodil, brighter and more colorful than any animal creature had ever borne before.

Hermione's hair was blue, and her complexion matched it for surprises by being a complimentary cream, paler than it had ever been before. She was notably devoid of freckles or other small imperfections, as were they all.

Harry was no longer a scrawny, underfed, puny and broken thing. He had the solid mass of muscle that his work for the Dursleys would have earned him had they not been starving him all that time. The damage from his massive, long term maltreatment and abuse all seemed to have been corrected.

He was also a redhead, of an unnaturally strawberry hue.

Aside from all having been converted over to primary colors, there were other changes as well. For one, they were all as beautiful as any fairy, and the temptation to sit and view themselves in the reflective surface of the pond was almost unreal, and so something they all resolved to fight. Though all would eventually give in and spend time before their mirrors that night.

It was hard not to. For mortal creatures there was always a sense that this or that could have been a little better. Even attractive people knew their own flaws, and often had issues because of them.

Not for the fey, and it was more than a little shocking to see everything done just right. If it were not for the fact that they knew ahead of time that most fairies were hopelessly conceited, it would have been easy to go that way themselves, and just spend the rest of their lives wholly absorbed in viewing their own reflections. They were breathtakingly beautiful, and it would have been easy to lose themselves in contemplating their new images.

All of them, sensing the danger, consciously avoided that temptation.

The shrine of the Fairy Queen was silent, the indefinable presence departed and the tiny statue once more still and frozen in a vaguely regal pose. The only smells were those of water and grasses, yet there was also a vague sense of wandering around the halls of a church after hours.

In spite of half expecting it, none of them bore wings, but luckily the naiads had brought a boat to the island's shore. Almost afraid to get caught up in admiring themselves forever if they contemplated their new changes too much, the trio of children rushed for the small boat, after grabbing a large leaf that had been lying next to them when they awoke. Seeing that it had a ritual written out on it, they rolled it up like a scroll and carried it along.

They had no pockets in the rather filmy, silky garments they were wearing, not having thought to transfigure any when making them.

Glancing over the scroll as the naiads bore their boat to shore, smoothly and as steadily as a rock, Hermione found it detailed a ritual using the Goblet of Fire to bind, or release, a magical, fire-based creature from service.

Releasing was easier than binding, in all cases, and they could use that to set Fawkes free.

Reaching the outer shore, they found their discarded vials of polyjuice and drank some immediately, restoring themselves to their previous appearances and mortal outlooks. It was oddly disappointing in a strange, yet reassuring way when the urge to just look at themselves forever departed.

Then they looked around themselves for the first time and saw the massive crowd of creatures pressing in from all sides.

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Author's Notes:

I had a question, "Where do I want to go with this?" And, like so many times I've asked myself the question, "Which of all of these wonderful

options do I choose?" the answer is, "All of them." By making them run errands for the Fairy Queen I can drop them anywhere in history or the future that I like, leave them until it is no longer interesting, then drag them back off on some other venture. It also means I don't have to rush into any one theme.

Chapter Seventeen
by Lionheart

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Luna gasped. Harry took a step back and reflexively reached for a wand that wasn't there, while Hermione's jaw dropped open.

Fairies fluttered everywhere, millions of them, as thick as fog, in all shades and varieties. They'd never seen so many of them crowded together. They perched on gazebos and fluttered along walks, a handful bravely gazing at their reflections in the pond a safe distance above its surface. But that was scarcely the beginning of the impacted nature of magical creatures shoved into a broad lawn too narrow by reason of the inhabitants.

Among those creatures packed in, practically shoulder to shoulder, were all varieties any of the trio had heard of and then some.

Exotic birds perched in trees above the pond, including a few golden owls with human faces. Satyrs romped on the boardwalk and in the gazebos, hooves clacking against wooden planks as they chased merry maidens who looked no older than high school seniors. Off to one side of the pond was a tidy encampment of short, stocky, bearded men and women in homespun clothing. On the other side several tall, graceful women stood conversing, dressed in flowing robes that reminded them of foliage. In a far corner of the field, right up against the hedge, they observed a pair of centaurs staring at them.

Luna whispered aside to her companions. "Centaurs are stronger, faster, and more intelligent than most humans - and they know it. Their focus as a race is on the pride of capability, whereas the fey are concentrated on pride in their appearance."

Harry was also glancing at their audience. "Well, for what it's worth, we have some form of as-yet-undefined protection. The Queen shared my mother's protection among the three of us while she was creating new bodies for us - whatever good that does us."

The girls turned to stare at him.

Meeting the two girls' questioning gazes, he said, "What? I went to sleep a fraction of a second after you two. She asked my permission and I gave it, because this way not only are you safer, but we can reinforce each other."

Luna smiled and shook her head. "No. That wasn't what I was thinking at all, although I do thank you for the gift. I don't feel we are in any danger, as the Queen promised to release us on the day we started our ritual. As you see from the sky it is dawn, so they haven't even found us yet. Our past selves haven't even begun to enter the forest. From what I see about the camps, many of these creatures have been here for days at least, possibly months or years. I don't think they came to gawk at us or threaten us. I believe they are here fleeing from danger."

"Oh!" Hermione's eyes widened. "So, just like animals will concentrate to flee from a forest fire, they are pressed in here..."

"... because this entire hedged area is a sanctuary," Luna concluded. "They are fleeing other menaces. My guess would be the dark creatures Albus has introduced to the forest."

"Acromantulas have voracious appetites," Harry agreed, feeling relieved at spotting a small herd of unicorns clustered together on the grass. "They can grow almost as fast as they eat, and this forest has thousands of them now. Nothing living is safe out beyond this protected zone."

"Well, we can't stay here," Hermione declared. "Even if we wanted to, there is a mission we are charged with."

"So, we have to cross an unknown amount of forest, through acromantula haunted woods, passed werewolves and who knows what else." Harry sighed. "It would be nice if we had our wands."

"Actually, this shrine is near the center of the woods," Luna offered.

"Didn't you say, back when this whole thing began, that part of what the ritual we went through was to do was grant us the ability to wandlessly cast fire spells?" Hermione eagerly inquired. "That's something the Queen mentioned, too!"

"And I very eagerly look forward to learning how to use those powers. But to do that we'd have to practice, and..." Harry waved a hand to indicate the area, packed with creatures. There wasn't an open space in sight. "Not exactly a place I'd want to use as a firing range."

Hermione blushed furiously. She'd hadn't counted on that. "Alright, I hadn't considered our need to practice. But you're right, we can't expect to get EVERY spell right the first time."

"We can practice them on our march, once we get out into the forest," he soothed. "But to avoid forest fires, I'd really prefer we practice along a stream, or better yet, out over the edge of a lake."

"But how are we to get out of here if we can't defend ourselves!?" the girl threw her fists down to her sides.

"May I have some hairs? Three will do." Luna ignored this conversation to approach one of the fairies that had been listening to them. On receiving the tiny threads of fairy hair, the blonde looked back toward the couple. "What? We are in no danger of overloading on fairy magic now, and one power we've already used is that of a metamorph." She waved to indicate their current bodies. "The Queen instructed us to take polyjuice and that would teach us how to automatically assume a form, our original human bodies we wear now, which we can then maintain using our own powers. One dose and we'd learned how to resume our former selves. Another and we can be little fairies again. We know it works, and it would seem best if we fly out of this place."

Harry let out a huff of air and chuckled. "Once again Luna leaps ahead of my thinking by about three steps or so. Yes, let's do that. And if we fly above the treetops we can practice our fire spells as much as we like. Nothing to burn in the air. So nothing to catch fire and spread."

"Exactly," Luna concluded serenely.

"At this point I'm starting to run low on polyjuice," Harry admitted. "I have enough for this purpose, and one more for each of us after it, but that's it."

Silently, the group charged three more vials, leaving only three left unused, and then, after looking at each other for one long second, suited actions to words and drank the bubbly vials down, shrinking once again to much smaller versions of themselves, although this time it was in fairy colors as the trio became tiny winged versions of their true forms, which were no longer human (although, at least they'd learned how to fake it convincingly).

"I wonder if we'll be able to use our wands, when we find them," Hermione declared as they all rose up over the level of the hedge, then the trees. As an experiment, the girl shot off a small jet of flame once they got clear.

"Why should there be any doubt?" Luna inquired, blinking.

Pleased at last to know something her companions didn't, the girl explained, "Because the magical core is located in the body. It's a living function, that's why ghosts don't cast spells. When you die, you leave your body behind, and lose the capacity to cast magic - unless you're a poltergeist, they retain their magic because they have a core associated with their spirit. Since we now have fairy bodies, we ought to have fairy cores of magic in our bodies, and wouldn't be able to cast spells by human methods - unless the Queen moved our cores out of our bodies and into our spirits before she gave us our new bodies. I guess that would make us poltergeists when we die."

Thinking about it, Luna nodded. "We'll know when we find our wands, I suppose."

Harry smiled, shooting out his own tiny flamethrower-like stream. "I, for one, do not fear death. So I don't expect I'll remain around as a ghost of any sort, poltergeist or not. Frankly, I'm rather looking forward to seeing my parents."

That was a statement neither girl had a response to, so they remained quiet the rest of their short trip, flying over the tops of the forest back toward the Clearing of Solstices and Equinoxes, vigorously practicing their fire spells the entire trip, to have something to do that avoided talking.

"This reminds me of Great Grandmother Wendy," Luna at last broke the silence, having lost patience with her slowly developing fire spells. "She told stories about how she used to fly free, much like this."

Hermione, who had been having much greater luck with hers, looked back on her friends and companions in confusion. "But I thought wizards had to have some sort of device to fly on?"

Harry grinned, coming out of his funk at last. "Second star to the right and straight on til morning."

Luna smiled. "Yes, Harry knows. I have interesting relatives on the Lovegood side. One was born Wendy Moira Angela Darling."

"Of Peter Pan legends?" Hermione was shocked, then frowned. "How come so many of your relatives ended up in muggle books?"

The yellow haired fairy smiled mysteriously, and teased, "The Quibbler was my father's dream, but we have owned a printing press for generations. A few copies got out, would be my guess as to how we first entered the muggle market. But it was a great deal more profitable. Few wizarding folk read for pleasure, but the Ministry of Magic did not care so long as they were sold as fables; and magical educations are expensive and had to be paid for."

Chuckling, they arrived back at the clearing, to find it just as they'd left it in the aftermath of their ritual. In their rush to reclaim their wands, clothing and other magical artifacts, they thought nothing of this for the moment.

Entering the clearing, they found the fairies had not only consumed all of the broth they'd once simmered in, but the stores of stockpiled materials were now gone, used up by the fairies to make themselves outfits of each kind - they could see them flitting around dressed in

acromantula silk and dragon hide. There was, however, one outfit per student of each type of material: one of dragonhide (blending pearl, scarlet and silvery blue colors in brilliantly devised patterns), and one acromantula silk, both impregnated with demiguise hair. All were done at jaw-dropping levels of workmanship and had several innate spells (Luna proclaimed them to be auto-sizing and self repair charms without normal limits, and self vanishing and reappearing on the dragonhide armor) but also done in fairy styles. Gorgeous but not normal, all very exotic and old-fashioned, even by wizarding standards. Undeniably lovely, however.

The fairies had outfitted themselves similarly. But not all got to partake in the ceremony, nor did all get outfits, so a few not so privileged spoke to the party of students and made it known they'd like very much if those former humans ran through the process again - and this time they'd be happy to add in their own supplies of gathered fairy silk, unicorn hair, and cotton-like materials gathered strand by strand out of magical plants and flowers.

Harry agreed, mostly as he'd wanted a wider range of outfits for himself and the girls, but also he had more suits of silver armor and outfitting his girls in some would make them both safer from the regular threats. A weapon or two would not be out of place either.

Luna, however, had busied herself with inspecting the workmanship and magic of the human-sized outfits laid out for them.

"How do we change back?" Hermione asked, as eager as a schoolgirl wanting to try on her first formal dress for a prom, flitting about her new clothes.

"Beats me, this body didn't come with an instruction booklet, and we didn't ask many questions when we had the chance. I don't even know what race we are, to be honest. Just a general category, one almost as wide as 'mammal'."

Harry shrugged, having found his wand and discovered it was longer than him.

"We ran out of time." Hermione insisted. "We'd kept up a steady stream of questions, and learned a great deal about loads of important subjects, but there wasn't time for everything. We were decomposing before our eyes!"

"I have to grant you that point," Harry conceded.

"We still have polyjuice charged with our human forms!" Hermione suggested. "We prepared three uses for each of us, and only used up one. Let's use that to return to ourselves again!"

"Excellent idea!" Luna chirped up. "I'll take one of Harry!"

The other two stopped to stare at her.

"It's a test," she teased demurely. "If I can assume my own human look after drinking a vial of Harry-polyjuice, then I will be that much closer to being in full control of those powers. And, if not, I'll still have a potion to resume my former looks. There are still two left."

Seeing the logic, if grudgingly, Harry surrendered one of the potions charged with his hair back from when he was human. Luna downed it quickly, and in moments had become him.

Moments later, after intense concentration, she had resumed her own human appearance.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. "I'd like one of you as well," the currently blue-haired fairy admitted.

Harry surrendered it, and while she was struggling to go from his human form to her native one, Harry slugged down a vial of Hermione polyjuice.

"Save one of those for me," Luna giggled, watching as the boy-turned-girl struggled with this newfound power, attempting to rejoin the human race in the body he'd once used naturally. "I'd like to be able to take Hermione's appearance as well."

"Huh?" Both others stopped struggling to understand and command these new powers in order to look at her in confusion.

By way of answer, Luna shifted from her own human form to Harry's, then back to her full-size fairy form, then once again resumed her own human look, hair of daffodil-yellow fading to blonde, as well as other shifts. Touching a lip, she pondered aloud. "I suppose it will take more work to be able to reduce myself to a tiny winged form at will, but I will make it."

Staring at each other again before resuming their efforts, the other teens had soon struggled their own ways back into their mortal appearances, in the process learning how to do so more easily in the future.

But not as easily as Luna, however. That would take more work. Hermione consoled herself that she was still better at wandless fire spells than the younger witch.

"The Queen did sort of recommend we learn how to counterfeit each other's appearances," the once-more bushy haired bookworm offered by way of apology to Harry, once she'd changed her features to his and back again.

He smirked wryly. "Yes, but now the two of you will go exploring what my body looks like in the mirror tonight, and I don't even get to be there!"

Hermione blushed furiously, having been caught. But Luna grinned unashamed and answered back boldly, "Of course! But it's not like you won't have the same privilege."

Harry thought about his remaining vials of Luna polyjuice guiltily. Wordlessly, he handed a Hermione vial to Luna, and one of his two Luna vials to Hermione.

The other he would keep. Turnabout was fair play, after all.

Luna downed the Hermione vial immediately, and the other two followed her example. Returning to their own forms this second time

proved easier, and by then they had a stronger handle on those shapeshifting powers. But for the older pair, shifting was still no piece of cake.

Luna offered no comment until they went to pick up their clothes. They all donned their silk garments before layering on the dragonhide over those. But it was when Luna darted over to snatch up Harry's father's cloak to hand it to him that she paused, stopping in her tracks as she examined it, amazed.

"This is ancient magic, Harry," Luna revealed, then gasped in awe, looking up at her friends. "I know this cloak! My father has been seeking it for years!"

Both her friends looked at her, puzzled.

"What do you mean, Luna?" Harry asked.

"Where did you get this cloak?" she ignored his question to ask hers.

In response, the boy shrugged. "It was my father's. I got the impression that it had been in my family as long as anyone could remember. I could look it up in our family journals, but I think that it's been an heirloom from before the founding of Hogwarts. My dad unwisely loaned it to Dumbledore, which cost him any chance he had of escaping Voldemort that Halloween night. If they'd kept it, they could've snuck away while their attacker searched the house."

Luna sighed and closed her eyes, relaxing. "An heirloom, of course. It would have to be something like that. Harry, this invisibility cloak is one of the magical world's legendary treasures. It has long been considered a myth. The short form of it is that a set of three objects are rumored to be able to defeat death - which explains why everyone has been looking for them for so long. Countless families have lost loved ones they'd like to have back, but only a complete set of three near-mythical items could restore them. This cloak is one of those three. The entire story would have been dismissed as fanciful talk long ago if one of those items hadn't cropped up with disturbing regularity - a wand that was rumored to be unbeatable, and has been

held in the hands of countless murderers and thieves who've stolen it."

"Wait!" Harry held up a hand, grinning slightly. "Why do I suddenly suspect Dumbledore has it?"

Luna shrugged, getting in on the spirit. "Should be easy to tell, that wand is made out of elder - the ONLY wand ever known to be made out of elder. Next time he casts a spell in our presence we should all look and see what wood his wand is made out of. But, just so you know, the Elder Wand only accepts a new master after he has defeated its old one."

"What is the third treasure?" Hermione leaned forward to ask.

"A stone. A small, unremarkable pebble, according to accounts. That, too, has been lost as long as anyone remembers," Luna supplied. "And if it isn't lost or buried or drowned in an ocean somewhere, or decorating someone's rock garden, then it, too, would've been kept like this cloak, a treasure of some family that most probably didn't even know they had it."

"Why wouldn't they know?" Hermione blinked in confusion.

Luna smiled in answer. "Because the stone, while useful, is part of a set. And if they knew what they had then someone, out of all those generations, would have tried to find and acquire the others to complete it, drawing attention to the fact that they had one part of that set already."

"How would it draw attention?"

Luna chuckled. "Hermione, to research an object this obscure your only chance for success is to go out and join those who are already searching, hoping to get them to share leads and clues. The Elder Wand has been easily found over most of its history, all you had to do was kill or defeat its bearer. But those searching for the set as a whole have never given up seeking for the other two. They need them if they are to achieve their ambitions to defeat death. So consider for a moment, if someone had the stone and went out

seeking the others. Say he found the wand, it would have been easy enough. Say he even defeated the one then holding it. Thousands have used tricks, sneak attacks, ambush and treachery to do likewise - the only ways to defeat someone with an unbeatable wand. So, your theoretical person is holding two of these prized artifacts. What happens the next time someone uses a dirty trick to defeat him? Say your next seeker is standing over the poisoned body of the last one to claim the Elder Wand - then he notices a small, round stone in that person's possession! Having been seeking for the entire set, as anyone after the wand would do, he recognizes the possibility that he has found two of the artifacts, so he takes that stone to test it, and lo and behold, he has two of the priceless treasures! Such a thing would've eventually become known. Since it hasn't ever been recorded as happening, it likely never has. Neither cloak nor stone have been sighted since the original tale long ago, so the most likely explanation is, if they aren't lost altogether, whoever had them did not know it."

"I feel so ignorant," Hermione drooped in sorrow.

Harry laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder, smiling. "Hermione, don't. You are a brilliant witch, the finest of your age. All this stuff should have been covered in Magical History class, and wasn't. That's not your fault."

"Well, this is obscure enough, perhaps not," Luna demurred. "The tale is well known, but not exactly considered history because two of its objects have been lost for so long. The wand, however, is well documented. That, at least, should have been covered, as it has played a considerable part in our history, bouncing from dark lord to dark lord, with the occasional hero thrown in."

Harry grimaced. "I'll lay a galleon on Albus having it, and dropping that part of the curriculum so people would forget about it and stop searching."

"No bet," Luna smiled serenely.

"Where can I read up on this?" the bookworm recovered neatly, deciding to put an end to her ignorance as quickly as possible.

Luna nodded. "It's a common wizarding bedtime story. You can find it in many books of such, though fewer print it of late, which would hold with Harry's theory that someone in power wants it forgotten. It's called The Tale of Three Brothers. My father believes those brothers to be Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus Peverell, and that they lived in Godric's Hollow."

Harry suddenly frowned.

"Harry?" both girls asked curiously.

Hermione suddenly had a thought, and looked ashamed. "Oh! I'm sorry to bring such a subject up! I know your parents lived there. We can talk about other things."

"No, it's not that," Harry waved her concerns away.

"Oh?" Luna grew curious.

Harry nodded. He'd been recalling something from Voldemort's memories, and decided to share. "I know of a ring with the Peverell coat of arms. That ring has a stone set in it, and was an heirloom of another family for a long time before the line died out."

"Do you know where to find it?" Luna perked up noticeably. "We ought to at least test it, to see if it is genuine or not."

Harry nodded resolutely. "I might have to do just that."

Hermione moved to pick up the cloak, to hand to Harry, but the material she picked up still left a pile on the ground. Scared to have damaged it, she then hurriedly opened what she had in her hand to see where it had ripped, only to discover to her shock that she was holding an intact cloak in her hands.

She turned a confused gaze to the others. Harry reached over to the pile of fabric still on the ground and lifted up another section, still leaving a small mound, and what he opened in his hands turned out to be another intact cloak identical to the one in Hermione's grasp,

both were identical to the cloak he had originally gotten that Christmas long ago.

"Which one is it?" Hermione asked while Luna lifted the third and last cloak of invisibility from off the ground.

"They're all identical, down to the last stitch and detail in their magical aura," Luna stated authoritatively, brow furrowed in growing confusion.

Harry started to laugh.

"What is it?" the girls pivoted from facing each other to question him.

Hermione got it before Luna, and turned a sly gaze on her sister fey. "Luna, I believe the answer Harry is laughing over lies in something you said earlier - that fairies routinely do the impossible by rules of magic as we know them. Didn't the Fairy Queen just admit to having played a part in the fairies finding our little botched ritual? And wasn't this cloak there with us? That could be an explanation for there being three of it now, instead of one. Due to those wings, there was enough fairy magic involved she might've done anything."

Luna looked a trifle too scared to be relieved, but nodded. "If anyone had the power to duplicate this cloak into three, it would have been her."

Hermione's face went from happy to scrunched up in thought. "Luna, if the wand part of this set is unbeatable, what about the cloak? Is it undefeatable also?"

The blonde began nodding. "Each article of the set was supposedly supreme, yet equal with the others. The wand, boosted by a user's power, could have cast spells to discover a person under this cloak, and if our Headmaster does have that, then we can count on him having cast such spells on his glasses."

"Count on it," Harry sobered. "He'd borrowed this cloak from my father, and probably only gave it back to see if myself, a bloodline heir, could discover powers in it he could not. But since he is

obsessed about secrets, I wouldn't doubt he had methods to track whatever I did despite wearing this. Frankly, I'd count on him have spares around, just in case he'd needed to arm his followers with ways to find me if I ever got out of hand."

Far away, in a heavily warded house, Alaster Moody sneezed, then spent the better part of half an hour dosing himself with disease prevention potions, and casting spells to determine who'd spoken of him.

Harry swirled the cloak he was holding around his shoulders, inadvertently causing Moody's detection spells to fail in their efforts to find him and vastly increasing the old auror's paranoia. "You know what?" he told the girls. "In my first year I did something stupid and dropped this cloak on the floor when I was finished with something and needed my hands free. Then I didn't have it later when I needed it, lost House points and got a nasty detention that put me in this forest, face to ugly face with Voldemort. To avoid stupid mistakes in the future, why don't we get cloak clasps to secure them around our necks, and charm our shirt collars to be like our expanding bookbags, so that when we don't want to be invisible we can retract our cloaks into storage under our collars?"

"Brilliant!" Hermione declared.

"Let's do the wand-work now." Harry picked up his wand, shooting off sparks when he did so and getting a grin out of the boy, who then suited action to words and began casting spells to accomplish just what he had said, so they could wear those cloaks always, but only be invisible when they wanted to.

Luna had been inspecting hers closely. She sniffed it carefully, then touched a corner to the tip of her tongue, before spitting vigorously. She scowled, and declared, "Harry, I don't think wearing these all the time is going to be a good idea. Whoever had this cloak before you dipped it in malaclaw venom. Have you had any unlucky accidents while using it?"

Now it was Harry's turn to scowl. "Plenty! Practically every time I used it. The one time, I told you, I forgot it on the floor. Another I triggered

an alarm and nearly got caught by my breathing. I've been chased and hounded under it, even caught by Dumbledore once or twice."

"Soaked instead of dipped then," Luna concluded sourly, spitting once more to try and get the foulness out of her mouth. "Whoever did that wanted the person wearing this cloak to be easily found. They couldn't dim the powers of the cloak directly, so they made it unlucky to increase the chance for anyone under it to stumble into mischances that would reveal themselves."

"Dumbledore," Harry spoke the name as if it was a curse. "He didn't want me using it too often, so counted on unhappy accidents building up until I had a natural aversion to using it. Plus, he couldn't get the cloak back from me unless he could find me first, and if I had bad luck that made his job easier when he decided to end his experiment of letting me own my property."

The girl began sadly nodding. "If you have been found by Dumbledore wearing it, and he had it before giving it back to you, then not only did he likely treat it with the unluckiest substance known to magic, but we can more strongly suspect that he has the Elder Wand, as according to the Fairy Queen he seeks to destroy you, and would not let you have this unless he could track you despite it - which only spells from the Elder Wand could do."

"So the cloaks are unlucky."

"Only when used," Luna quickly offered. "Malaclaw venom is harmless when carried in a vial or some sort of container. Contact with living material activates the bad luck. I'd guess you'd had no problems with the cloak when it was in your trunk?"

Nodding, Harry sighed and removed his cloak, shrinking it to stuff deep in a pocket (a bit amazed that this outfit even had pockets, as they were a comparatively modern invention out of keeping with the era this style dated back to). The others quickly followed suit.

Hermione perked. "What about that stone? Could it detect the cloak or meet the wand on equal terms?"

Luna considered that question thoughtfully. "It is a source of unfathomable power, so it's bearer could likely do such a thing. But we have so few records of it I couldn't say for certain what it does or does not do, save for calling up the spirits of the dead when turned three times in the hands. That much we have in the original legend."

Finished with her recitation, Luna picked up her wand. Having collected their attire and picked up the last of the tools and implements they'd left around the clearing, as well as used their wands, the scenery around them morphed like fading mist back to the clearing as it had been the morning before they'd arrived to put that ritual into motion.

"What happened?" Harry stared around.

"Time moves strangely around the fey." Luna considered, "The Fairy Queen promised to send us back to the morning we began our ritual, she just never said when she would do it. Since we have just been picking over the site as we left it after that ritual concluded, and retrieved all our belongings we care to carry with us, we were dealing with the aftermath of that ritual. Now we are standing where it would happen before it began."

"She kept her promise, she just let us collect our things first," Hermione concluded. "That saves us a great deal of awkwardness."

"And arms us with our wands," Harry grinned. "I'd say let's go nab our dear old Divination teacher right now! The longer we delay before doing this, the more likely our nemesis is to learn of our plans from his pet oracle and find some way to thwart them. Now is the best chance we'll ever have, I think."

"I can't go," Luna cringed. "I'm sorry, but having tasted that malaclaw venom while identifying it, I shouldn't be involved in anything risky, as it's sure to go against me. A normal dose would wear out in two weeks, and this was far less, a few hours at most, but just to be careful I really shouldn't do anything chancy for several days, just to be safe."

Hermione nodded briskly. "Then Harry and I will go. He's right. The sooner we get this done, the better chance we'll have. No need to go surrendering any advantages. We'll never be able to keep a secret until his oracle is gone."

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Author's Notes:

Has no one else noticed that EVERY time Harry uses that cloak something goes wrong?

So they've got multiple copies of a priceless cloak, it's just sometimes better not to use it than to use it.

And Hermione started out behind the curve on these few obscure subjects the others were far more knowledgeable on. But Hermione does not stay ignorant for long. Already she's recalling what they'd said earlier and applying that to their current situation.

She asked questions when she didn't know, but now that she knows more she is resuming a more dominant role - not that she'll ever eclipse the other two on their areas of expertise, but she won't be trailing behind much either. She's not like that. Anything she doesn't know, she studies until she does.

So expect her to have the odd surprise for the other two every so often.

Chapter Eighteen

by Lionheart

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A loud growl interrupted the teens' conversation.

Harry looked embarrassed. "On reflection, I am reminded that this body has never eaten anything in the entire span of it's short existence. Anyone care to join me in breaking it in?"

Hermione became aware that her own stomach was trying to gnaw a hole through her backbone. "Sure! I'm game. What shall we have for breakfast?"

"Hogwarts is out," Luna cautioned. "We can't hold private conversations there, no matter what we do. And we have to plan."

Harry acquired a sly grin. "I was thinking Kentucky Fried Chicken."

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Somehow, the girls were not certain how, Harry found a college town where the fast food stays open all night, and side-along apparated the two there. It was a combined KFC/A&W, so they had hamburgers and fries on the menu as well as the traditional biscuits and fried chicken. Seeing as how their entire digestive tracts were empty from one end to the other, intestines as vacant as their stomachs, they wound up ordering a lot, and quite a variety.

Harry also proved able to conjure muggle currency, which put Hermione into fits about honesty, until they had a lengthy talk over their cheeseburgers and chicken legs about the world financial system and how, with fractional reserve banking, that was essentially what the banks, mortgage institutions, and lenders of all types were already doing: conjuring money out of nowhere.

This led to Hermione being deeply distressed about the stability of the world economy, as the entirety of the world banking institutions ran on principles that a hundred years ago were prosecuted as fraud;

things that could, would and HAD gotten bankers lynched, strung up the nearest tree for robbery.

The poor girl started muttering about getting her parents to move their assets over to wizarding currency, as at least that was gold, which had enduring value and was considerably more difficult to counterfeit.

Appetites sated at last, Harry pocketed the coleslaw containers no one had been interested in. Refilling their sodas before they left (ironically, Harry had never tasted one himself, but Tom Riddle HAD. But there was no reason for the Dursleys to part with money for a soda for him when there was perfectly good water in the tap), they left for a muggle park to do their planning.

Luna left to go attend to business of her own, and so she would not influence their choices negatively as part of her own bad luck. Harry gave her a dose of polyjuice and a hair summoned off the head of a coed so she could take the Knight Bus and not be recognized, then he and Hermione went off on their own.

And Harry felt it a good idea, to get back into the spirit of things, to pick up right about where they'd left off.

"All are supreme, yet equal. Only Dumbledore's wand can always find my cloak. How fair is that?" he grumbled jokingly.

Hermione positively glittered, and rushed in to explain what she'd already figured out on her own. "Oh! I found that part easy to understand. It's simple, really.

"You have three equals. Let's describe it mathematically, maybe that will help. A, B, and C are equal, they all have the same value. So the wand isn't greater than your cloak or the stone. However, a wand is also boosted by the magic of its wielder. So A plus X is greater than either B or C. A, the wand, cancels out the value of B, the cloak, and you are left with X, the magic of the person who wields the wand. So long as you have nothing to counter X, the spells of the wand wielder could find the cloak. But say you cast your own spells to hide yourself, on top of what the cloak was already doing. A and B would still cancel

each other out, then it would be a contest between your magic, Y, and the magic of the wand wielder to see who emerged victorious."

Harry grimaced, getting it. "And Dumbledore is not only extremely powerful, he possesses a vast arsenal of spells and devices to choose from to aid him, so X, whatever he is adding to that wand, is an enormous value."

"Far greater than Y, I'm afraid. We're all still students," Hermione agreed, glancing aside at Harry in concern.

Harry, in spite of having Voldemort's memories and spell arsenal, had to agree. Most of what the Dark Slytherin knew was Dark Magic, which by its very nature was weighted heavily towards combat magic, torture, and so on.

He knew a great deal of other magic, but Dark was his specialty.

In a contest of information gathering or concealing, things would naturally go to the Dark Ravenclaw as the one who had every advantage of inclination, but also time and resources.

That was his special area.

But Hermione wasn't done explaining. "And the way they can all be different, yet equal, is simple as well! Just compare it to economics, think of it as fifty pounds worth of gold, fifty pounds worth of flour, and fifty pounds worth of ... I don't know, something else, stone maybe. I know those values fluctuate in the muggle world, but just ignore that for now. Each one is worth exactly what the others are, but each is used for different things. You wouldn't want to make a semiconductor out of stone or flour, nor would you want to eat gold or rock, and you couldn't make very much of a house out of dry cakes or gold leaf. All equal in value, but suited to different purposes!"

"Thank you, now on to stealing Trelawney from Dumbledore," Harry put the real item on the agenda back on track. "What we are trying to do here is called 'stealing a march', or acting before our enemy has a chance to find out what we are up to and react to counter us. It's our only possible chance against someone like Dumbledore, to be honest.

He's got too many resources to counter once he starts to realize that we are in play against him. So long as he thinks we are merely pawns he is moving about at his whim, we have some measure of freedom - only so long as he doesn't realize we are using it, of course. Once he accepts the fact that we are resisting him... well, things will get much harder. As he effectively holds ALL legal power in Britain, he makes up the rules. We are opposing a petty tyrant on his own turf, and the very least of all actions he could use to discipline or control us would be to make every single thing we want to do, that he doesn't want us to do, illegal."

Hermione paled. "I hadn't realized it was that bad."

"It isn't. It's worse." Harry grimaced. "But according to the Queen it's a war we've got to fight regardless of how we feel about it. We're in the war. Whether we fight back and try to win it is up to us, but we're already in it."

His girlfriend looked at him in fright, before nodding soberly.

Harry shot her back a grin. "Oh! It really is not so bad! Dumbledore has a bad habit of thinking far too much over every possible aspect of a situation before he does anything. Now we can use that against him, as it makes his reactions extremely slow to anything he hasn't planned out ahead of time. All we really have to do is go in, grab Trelawney, and jump out a window onto a set of brooms. We'll be gone before he knows it."

"Only we'll never be able to return to school, and he'll turn those laws against us, like you said." Hermione frowned in concentration. "No Harry, like you said, it's best if he never knows we're resisting him. We should at the very least go in under a disguise, or something."

Now it was Harry's turn to grow serious. "Hermione, I don't think you know just what we are up against. I'll tell you later how it happened, but over the summer I became an expert on wards and how to break them, and once you do that it becomes almost reflexive to study any you come across. The ones around Hogwarts have been turned into an information network, much like a spider's web. But the ones on the Divination tower are extremely overdone in that aspect. They make

the ones over the rest of the castle look tame. It's clear that Dumbledore's hiding a treasure there, I just never thought that he could consider Trelawney that treasure, not until the Queen told us, anyway."

He sighed. "Hermione, we can't even go to class there without setting off soft alarms, and that's after we got keyed in with a certain degree of permission, because we do have class with her. Strangers would set off far more extreme alarms, and that's if we could figure out how to fool them."

Hermione was nodding, deeply considering this. "But I'm already known for getting excited about lessons and asking teachers for extra work to do, or trying to get ahead. So you and I could go in on that pretext, and any alarm we set off he would likely ignore. If what you said is true, about anything and everything setting off alerts of some sort, then I'm sorry but sooner rather than later it would all just become background noise. The wards you describe would be spamming the Headmaster with several hundred messages a day! If he couldn't learn to ignore them they'd drive him mad! So routine messages like scheduled students arriving to class early would get ignored. They'd HAVE to be! All we'd have to figure out how to do is leave without any traces of our having kidnapped her!"

"Rescued, more like," Harry corrected. "If Dumbledore has meddled with her mind to the point of almost irreparably destroying her gift, then Trelawney can't be happy with whatever he is doing to her."

"Point," the girl conceded.

Harry kicked back on a bench and thought. "Okay, to do this we're going to need to do several things. First is some method of invisibility, so we can creep past most of the regular guards, otherwise our steps will be tracked too completely for Dumbles not to know the entire story. Too bad the fairies used up all of our demiguise hair, or I could've made cloaks out of that."

"Harry!" Hermione shot up in her seat excitedly. "Didn't Luna say that they'd incorporated demiguise hair into the outfits they made for us? The outfits we now have on?"

He looked at her in dawning recognition of her point before hurriedly checking his own outfit, and, after fiddling with it for several moments, vanished. His voice then appeared out of thin air. "Got it. The clothes come with both a broad-brimmed plumed hat and a hood," he stated unnecessarily, as she could observe that on her own. "Obviously, those are redundant. You don't need one if you've got the other. But when you wear both together, as well as the gloves, you activate that power and turn invisible."

She followed suit and soon vanished herself. The gloves on her outfit were more slim and feminine, the hat and hood a different style than his (just as her outfit was a dress and his included trousers) but the effect was the same: total coverage of the body invoked the invisibility power. All they really had to do was put on the gloves and pull the hoods over so they covered their faces. Due to the old-fashioned nature of the clothes, they already had neck to toe coverage, as that was just the way those styles worked.

Of course, they still had a hat, and the easiest place to leave it was still on top of the head. So Harry could be forgiven for thinking that wearing the hat and hood together was the key. Hermione quickly sorted him out on that.

They could see out through the hoods just fine even when they were pulled down to cover their faces. And, the pair found that when they both had their hoods down that way they could also see each other as dim outlines, clearly not visible to others, but just as clear as ghosts to each other.

So they began to have an invisible conversation.

Harry was grinning strongly now. "It's not the super-invisibility of a supreme and ancient magical artifact, but it will do nicely."

"And this doesn't have a bad luck curse on it," Hermione agreed.

"And Dumbledore's wand lets him detect the super-cloaks anyway," Harry tossed off a shrug. "So back to the subject of our raid," he

discussed with his partner as they both sat invisibly on a bench in a park. "Next on the agenda is obtaining a means of taking Trelawney without resistance, as we can assume that any interlopers can't just carry her off from the life she's had for the past dozen years or so without explanations we have no time for, and wouldn't want to speak out loud in that castle in any case."

"Harry," Hermione admonished, shaking her head. "Any number of spells would serve just fine! Why, there's Stupefy, and Petrificas Totalis..."

"And none of those would serve us in the least, as we don't dare use wands." Harry shook his own head. "Those wards would detect it, and wand use is not a regular part of Divination, so would stand out as abnormal - especially any and all combat spells. They'd flag our Headmaster with alarms he could not ignore, because they'd be of a much more strident type than the standard 'student going to class' warnings. You can ignore car alarms and telephones ringing, but this would be an air raid siren going off in his ear. The wards are set to give a very high priority to any spell we might use to disable her. Any combat spell at all would have him rushing that tower in moments, sure that the worst had happened, and in our case he'd be right - not something we want if we are trying to disguise our presence."

"Oh. I hadn't realized," Hermione spoke softly, getting an odd look from a passing college student who heard words from a bench no one was sitting at.

Conversation resumed once the early morning jogger had departed.

"No worries at all. You can't read wards. Most can't." Harry shrugged. "And before you ask, yes, I'll explain later how you can, and where I learned. But I just got struck by an idea. Dumbledore is too good by far at identifying people and tracing magic through signatures left by their wands. But devices don't leave the same kind of traces, none at all, really. That's why he carries things like a deluminator, because wand use can be detected, but devices can't. So he can darken areas under heavy wards without being detected."

"So, we need some kind of device to subdue Trelawney," Hermione muttered, putting her great brain to work on it. "Too bad Hogwarts suppresses muggle devices. This would be a perfect opportunity for a tazer."

"Actually, I was thinking of potions that could do it," Harry offered. "I have a few that stun or shock, and they only have to be splashed on somebody. But it's still very early. We might easily find her asleep and be able to dose her with something without her knowing."

"That would do it then," Hermione nodded her agreement firmly. "So long as we can avoid leaving splashes. I'm sure Dumbledore could identify potions by their traces, if he found any droplets scattered about."

"Hmm, good point." Harry considered, before bouncing a shrug no one but her could see because of their magic clothes. "Well, then, we'll just have to acquire potions that can't be traced to us, maybe buy some at a store."

The invisible girl shook her head. "Not if we're going to catch her asleep. I've been to Diagon Alley often enough to know most stores don't open until well after breakfast. We'd have had our first Divination class before then, and all chance of catching her asleep will be gone, unless we want to wait a day."

Harry invisibly shook his head. "No. We have to take her as soon as possible. It's our best, and possibly only, chance for success. If the Headmaster learns of our plans getting her out of there becomes impossible."

The bookworm suddenly shot up, her eyes shining with the brilliant inner light of a great idea. "Professor Snape! I know he keeps a stock of completed potions in his office! I saw them once when I was in there asking for extra work! He might have what you need!"

Harry threw on a wide grin, and hugged his currently invisible friend. "You're right! And, considering the kind of person Snape is, he's guaranteed to have the sort of potions we want! Excellent idea, Hermione!"

She glowed at the praise, immediately launching on to the next phase of their operations. "So we can get to her invisibly, pass the wards as students who ought to be going to her class anyway, and dose her with a potion to get her tractable. Then how do we get her out?"

The currently invisible (except to his friend) boy shook his head. "Have to be brooms out a window. He'll know the moment she starts going anywhere. He has wards to track her, and she doesn't go anywhere often enough for him to disregard the spam warnings of her moving about. We can use school brooms so there is nothing to track to us."

"Brilliant!" Hermione declared, drawing attention from a few students on their way to very early classes to this oddly vocal yet empty bench.

Harry eyed a pair of athletic types, a boy and a girl, on their way to an early morning tennis match, and got an idea.

After hurried consultations, the pair made their way back to Hogwarts in the brisk post-dawn light, using their fairy clothing to be invisible, and under the influence of polyjuice charged with hair taken from the tennis couple.

Harry knew Voldemort's memories, and Voldemort knew Snape's proclivities. So they were able to find a narrow corridor through the wards of Hogwarts from a certain point on the grounds through a few twisting passages, right to Snape's office.

From Voldemort's knowledge of the man, Harry knew their Potions Professor would be dealing in black market potions while at Hogwarts, and he had to have a route for his customers to reach him, as he could not go out to meet them without gaps appearing in his schedule that would seem suspicious for a teacher who was supposed to be on hand for kids at their boarding school.

Knowing that such a thing had to exist, and that Dumbledore refused nothing that Snape really wanted, the duo were able to use Voldemort's ability to examine wards to find such a route and follow it

in to where it ended: right in Snape's office in the dungeons, next to his classroom.

There stood a potion cabinet that was well stocked with a variety of illegal and questionable potions. Harry spent a moment examining the protections on it, before whispering close into Hermione's invisible ear.

"It's warded, but not very well, obviously the work of Snape rather than Dumbledore. Two parts of this concern us, I can bypass the rest. One alerts Snape if a potion is lifted from a shelf - a fairly standard anti-theft measure so his customers don't help themselves while his back is turned or he isn't here. Next alerts him if any of the bottles are empty when the cabinet doors are closed - obviously he's had a few canny customers use switching spells to nip a potion without taking the bottle."

"How are we going to get passed them?" she whispered hotly back.

He grinned in reply. "I have empty bottles from potions we've used before, all we have to do is take the fluid we want and not leave his bottles empty. His wards don't tell him what is in a bottle, only if it is full or not."

Nodding, Hermione looked around and, finding a flexible bit of tubing among the tools left lying around, demanded some empty bottles from Harry, then set herself up to siphon out the contents of some potions.

"What do I get?" she asked over her shoulder.

Harry checked over the contents of the cabinet. "This one, this one, and these four... oh dear."

Hermione looked where he was staring. There on a shelf was a collection of small bottles holding hairs, each carefully labeled. "Draco Malfoy, age eleven, Draco Malfoy, age twelve... Pansy Parkinson, same ages... there's practically every Slytherin, and..." she held her breath to stifle a gasp. "Harry POTTER, age twelve?! Hermione GRANGER, age thirteen?! Why?"

Harry covered her mouth to prevent her from screaming in outrage. Fiercely the boy whispered in her ear, "Calm. The man sells polyjuice. It should not seem odd that he would sell hairs as well, although it is reprehensible. Why anyone would want them, though..."

"Themes and role plays," Hermione concluded, looking angry. "There are tons of people who want to be with the real Harry Potter, but if they can't have the real one, why not a fake? It's disgusting, but..."

Harry rolled his eyes. "A magical pimp, hard at work. Never mind, we can use this to our advantage. I'll collect the hairs. You siphon the potions."

Nodding, Hermione got hard at work, draining out several vials Harry pointed out into empties that he provided, making sure not to jostle the originals on their shelves and possibly set off a warning. When she was done she noted that Harry had deftly taken out all the hairs using a set of tweezers, and was now adding spoonfuls of coleslaw, unused since breakfast, into the now empty bottles. Surprised, she even stood aside and let him do that to the potion bottles she had emptied, closing the cabinet on them moments later.

No alarms sounded.

"No Slytherins take Divination, nor does Snape appear to collect hair from many people outside of his House," Harry told her in hushed tones. "So we'll have to go up as Harry and Hermione Potter."

He gave her a wink, and she smiled for him, downing the potion to resume her human looks, not that she needed a potion to do that anymore, but she would follow his plan. They'd known going in here that talking, especially about their plans, had to be kept to a minimum.

Departing out from the Potion Master's office the pair scurried upstairs and thence to Gryffindor Tower, where Harry crept into the second year boy's dorm and stole Colin's camera, then took along a fresh roll of film and some development potions.

He'd make it up to Colin later.

Then it was up to the Divination tower. Dumbledore was still asleep, resting from the poisoned chicken bone wound that Draco had delivered to him, was it only last night? Real time, he supposed it was. Subjectively, that seemed so long ago.

Well, that increased their chances for success to have Dumbledore out of action, for the moment at least.

Slipping inside the wards around the Divination classroom, Harry noticed them sending off a standard alert message to Dumbledore about the arrival of two students, early to class. Hermione was right, Dumbledore had to get hundreds of those messages a day, considering they were sent whether the student was early, on time, or arriving late. Information overload would have killed many a lesser man, although he suspected the Headmaster had used rituals to increase his ability to process such information. He'd had to have done so, to have survived under the information load so long.

But you could feel wind on your cheek, and when it was windy all the time still learn to ignore those sensations.

Alerts for anything out of the ordinary would be another matter, but so far they were just two students showing up early for class. Several hours early, but teachers had to be available at all hours for special lessons or advice. So there were no problems there.

They were inside the Divination classroom before Harry noticed any flaw at all in the wards Dumbledore used to alert him to Trelawney's captivity.

"There is no separate ward alerting him to whether someone steps from the classroom to the teacher's private quarters," Harry whispered especially quietly directly into Hermione's ear, noting the room had several paintings and not wanting to be overheard.

Giving him a quick yet frightened smile, Hermione led as the invisible duo darted into the oracle's bedchambers. The place was a madhouse, scattered about with all sorts of Trelawney's belongings

haphazardly stacked in uneven piles or strewn randomly about the floor. It was all well scrubbed, it had to be with House Elves looking after everything, but it had no organization at all, looking like a kindergartner's toybox when no one came through to tell her to clean up after herself.

Sunk completely into an overstuffed bed, under mountains of covers to guard against the chill permeating her drafty tower, the teacher snored softly. Hermione had to poke over the side before she'd believe their teacher had actually sunk a good twelve inches into her super soft, thick mattress.

Harry found the one painting in the room, carefully stood up with his back to it, brought out Colin's camera and shot a picture of the room before waving for Hermione to follow him into the bathroom. Inside, he gave a heartfelt sigh of relief. The chamber was opulent by some standards, fairly average by the ones set by this castle, not even on par with the prefect's bath.

But there wasn't a painting.

"What now?" Hermione whispered.

"No paintings in here. My guess is, judging by the covers, Trelawney likes her baths hot enough they steam, and that would rot the canvas. We can develop a photo in here. I snapped one in front of the painting, once I noticed it was watching her like a hawk despite her being asleep."

Hermione did not have to be told. She's seen enough muggle movies. "And so we can put a photo in front of the security camera, or in this case portrait, to show what it expects to see and thus convince it that whatever we are doing isn't happening."

"And then we make the switch," Harry nodded.

It didn't take long to develop the photo. Wizards were big on convenience, and disliked waiting for their results. He had a photo sheet blown up large enough to drape over the portrait in moments.

"Harry, I just thought of something," Hermione whispered desperately once they were prepared to go out into the teacher's bedroom once again. "We can't take Trelawney out of the castle now! She was there when we had our first class with her, and that is a couple of hours from now!"

Harry paused to consider his best friend, before reminding gently, "We have to take her as soon as possible. We've all agreed on that. We can get her now - which may be the only opportunity we'll ever get."

"But this is before we had our first class with her, so it would create a paradox!" she whispered fiercely. "Surely time itself would intervene to make us fail, or something! We can't risk that!"

"No, it won't." Harry grinned at her in reply. "Time moves oddly around the fey, remember? Loops and spirals avoid crossing, even though they seem to. It's the ability to move sideways a touch that makes all the difference. But even so, think on this: If one of us were to take her place and give the lesson as we remember it, no paradox would have resulted!"

The girl stood stunned, too shocked to reply, and Harry kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks Love!" He slipped out, and she followed in a daze. Already, by the time she'd gotten out, he'd maneuvered invisibly before the watch-portrait, and with a deft bit of sleight of hand placed the photo before it.

The painting never noticed. One moment it was watching a room, and the next a wizarding photograph of that room. Harry had done all the work invisibly so one moment it was watching a scene, and the next a picture of it, with nary a ripple in between.

Had Hermione been less stunned she could've appreciated that better.

Then Harry was at their teacher's bedside, and had produced a funnel, which he fed into their teacher's mouth, shortly thereafter pouring a potion down it. Trelawney choked, swallowed and sputtered awake, but Harry had chosen well, dosing her with Unctuous Unction,

a potion that persuades the drinker that the giver is her very best friend.

Sybil Trelawney came sputtering awake and looked at Harry, who was now visible and holding a finger to his lips in a shushing gesture.

Smiling, the teacher obeyed her best friend's suggestion, staying silent.

Grinning wide now, Harry leaned close to her and whispered in Trelawney's ear, but whatever it was he said Hermione couldn't overhear, which was well, she supposed, as if she couldn't the painting couldn't either.

Harry then handed the teacher another potion, which she downed readily, turning into an identical copy of Hermione's mortal body. He then gave her a set of Hermione's school robes, making the girl wonder just how long Harry had been planning to switch them.

She soon had her answer, as he then left the teacher, who skipped off into her bathroom to dress, and whispered into Hermione's ear. "She thinks that she is going out on a lark with a very old friend, and has to slip out as you in order to get away from her employer - which is right. The wards registered you and I enter, they won't see anything unusual about you and I leaving. Her own clothes have tracking charms on them, especially her glasses. Get rid of them before you make your own exit and you should make it much further much faster. I'll meet you at the place we're supposed to take her, ok?"

And with that, he pressed another vial of polyjuice and a few of Trelawney's hairs into the maiden's hands, along with one of the shrunken brooms.

Hermione didn't like it, but could see no other way. Desperately biting her lip, she nodded her acceptance of this plan.

And with a last bit of advice, "Slip out as soon as you can," Harry took the teacher now dressed as her, sheltered her inside of his invisible robes, and left Hermione behind to prevent a paradox.

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Author's Notes:

Went back to chapter twelve and replaced Eton with Cheltenham Ladies College on a reader recommendation, as I was tired of getting reviews about Eton being an all-boy's school.

Heck! I LOVE AUs! I could have made it an all-HAMSTER school if I'd wanted to! One Hermione was only able to sneak into because of her big front teeth and bushy hair.

But it's not worth the bother, so you get this. It's easier. Well, and I couldn't picture Hermione waxing eloquent about the academic excellence of her opportunities to run around on those little round wheels.

Chapter Nineteen
by Lionheart

|||

Hermione fretted visibly, soaking inside of her teacher's tub. Warm steam filled the room like confusion filled her thoughts.

All of the immediate emergencies had been taken care of. She had taken Trelawney's nightgown and put it on, drunk the polyjuice and now resembled her. She'd read books she'd found in the teacher's quarters until she judged it about time the professor would have to rise to get ready for her day, then reclaimed the wizarding photograph in a tricky bit of work that had to have her in the bed, resting where Trelawney had been, and (reasoning that the teacher had to be able to use magic in her own room) summon the photo using Trelawney's wand, after disillusioning it so the portrait watching her room wouldn't notice the switch.

Then the real hard part had begun, rising and pretending to be Trelawney.

All her own clothes had been shrunken and placed in a pocket of an outfit that she'd found in Trelawney's closet, the one she could recall their teacher wearing from that day they'd had her class. Dressing before she left the bathroom, as she didn't want a portrait peeping on her, even if it was one of a girl, and even if Hermione wasn't in her own body, the disguised girl left the sheltered toilet area and went back into the bedroom.

She found breakfast waiting on a handy side table, and sat down to eat, still embroiled in heavy thoughts. The polyjuice had worn out hours ago, but she'd hardly noticed at all, as there was hardly any effort in keeping her teacher's form. So distracted was she, she hardly noticed this improvement of her skill.

Finishing quickly, and in no mood for tea, so leaving the cup steaming alone in the bright light of a no longer nearly so early morning Hermione stood, trying as she had been for hours to recall all she could of their first Divination lesson, although it seemed a week ago

now. Actually, it was only a couple of days, in spite of being today. Was this why all fey were so barmy in stories? They couldn't keep their facts straight because, to them, they WEREN'T straight? You'd think it would be easy enough to keep track of what day it was, but already that was one of the more complicated parts of their lives!

Shaking herself out of a rapidly growing funk, the girl focused herself on the task at hand. Ok, so she couldn't recall exact specifics of the lesson, only bits and pieces, and being alternately impressed and put off by the teacher. Trelawney hadn't acted as assured or comfortable at teaching as she ought, but had almost constantly come through with surprising insights.

Hermione paced back and forth, pondering how to go forward with this. She had committed the class textbook to memory as a matter of course before even coming to school this year. She did that with all of her books. So she knew the material therein, and the teacher had stuck pretty closely to it... maybe that was because it was Hermione teaching herself all that lesson?

Okay, that settled it. She now knew why fey were barmy.

'Wait,' she realized, stopping herself. 'It's a class on DIVINATION! Seeing the FUTURE! Of course, knowing a bit of your future was hardly difficult when you were already living in your own past!

Hermione smirked, already deciding that, yes, she could do this. Moments later a bell rang, alerting the school to the need to be ready for first class.

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"Now I already know all of your names," Hermione/Trelawney told the class, trying hard to keep a superior smirk off her expression.

"You dear," the current Hermione/Trelawney directed a look to the Hermione of the past, human and from what felt like so long ago. "You are thinking what a cheap trick that is, no? Memorizing students names and faces?"

Well, it was one. A cheap trick, that is.

Nevertheless, Hermione/Trelawney loomed close over Student/Hermione. "Oh yes, you are. But then how do you explain how I know that your father last scolded you when you were seven? Or that it was because you'd spilled tea over a medical encyclopedia that he said you shouldn't be reading?"

Student/Hermione jerked as if stung, obviously revising her opinions of this teacher and subject as no longer woolly. Hermione/Trelawney smiled and surveyed the rest of her little class. Passing close to Ron, she couldn't resist herself and stated, "You, Ronald Weasley, are an obnoxious little beast and shall come to a very bitter end."

Addressing the class, she said, "Ronald Weasley is an immature jerk almost totally driven by greed and jealousy. He is one of those arrogant louts who is actually proud of his own ignorance - as proven by the fact that he ridicules anyone who knows or does more than he, which is almost everyone. He is not a fit mate for woman or beast, and it would ruin any girl to go out with him. He does not appreciate his friends - he would not appreciate a girl. Any girl. If you want respect, love or loyalty, look elsewhere."

Lavender and Parvati, along with most other girls, giggled. Ron's ears flushed red in anger, and Harry looked confused. Student/Hermione frowned, not able to agree with her 'teacher's' prediction. Oh well, she'd learn.

Hermione/Trelawney could no longer conceal her smirk at having destroyed any chance for Ron to get a date while at Hogwarts. It was petty, but this revenge for having backstabbed her and Harry did make her feel better, and she continued softly floating on light steps about the room as she addressed the class. "He, like many others, are taking this subject for easy grades."

The Hermione posing as the teacher stopped to meet Harry's eyes, and saw the student jump, as that HAD been the reason he'd once signed up for this course, on Ron's urging.

By now Hermione/Trelawney was having fun, shocking her friends, fellow students and housemates. She paused, as if looking off into a far distance. "Ah, two late students will be joining us in a moment, and another one minute and twenty seconds later. They are, in order of appearance, Hanna Abbott, Susan Bones, and Justin Finch-Fletchley."

The two girls named scrambled up the ladder into class just moments after she finished speaking, all huffing and puffing, out of breath for having gotten lost on the way.

Then they wondered why so many people were staring at them.

Hermione/Trelawney noted triumphantly out of the corner of her eye her student self taking out a watch and timing her prediction for the third. But she had no fear of getting caught. She knew it was accurate!

It was easy to know. She'd been through this class before.

"Only two of you have read the book," Hermione/Trelawney pompously declared, knowing she was right. "Hermione Granger, who did so of her own volition, and Parvati Patil, whose sister Padma made her study ahead on her subjects. A few of you have paged through the text, to a degree, but none aside from those two remember anything pertinent to today's lesson. Now if you will all turn with me to page seven, you will find that is where Parvati left the bookmark she has lost, and once Mister Finch-Fletchley joins us you will all discover his older brother scrawled a dirty picture on that page in his."

Justin joined them right on time, tried unsuccessfully to slip into an unused seat without anyone noticing (most of the class had been watching for him, not a few with watches out and timing this - but the teacher's prediction was bang on the dot), and asked his seat mate, Ron (Harry was sitting over at a table with Student/Hermione) what page they were on.

Half the class rose and was looking over his shoulder as Justin opened it, and the blush on his face and burst of laughter from those

watching was proof enough of the scrawled picture's presence, but Justin's outburst about why his brother did things like that to him was final proof in the pudding.

Seeing her student self staring at her, wondering if this was a clever setup, suddenly Hermione/Trelawney had a flash of insight as to why her younger self had been alternatively both shocked beyond words and dismayed about this class. So shocking was this revelation that the girl posing as teacher gave up on her plans to stick religiously close to the material, and ventured into a bit of something a whim caused her to make up on the spot.

"Attention class," she drilled them with a hard gaze through Trelawney's bug-like glasses. "One of the first rules of Divination that should be known by all who aspire to learn this art is this: Don't forget that you may not like what you see. The future is what is it. If it is not what you like, do not blame me. We actually avoid those fields that grant certain knowledge of the future, as if it is certain it cannot be avoided. And where is the use in that? Knowing ahead of time that you will have a miserable, unhappy marriage is of no use to anyone unless that can be avoided. That is why we seek warnings instead of harsh, unalterable predictions of Fate."

Hermione/Trelawney saw some students scribbling this in their notes. She would later go over her own notes from this class and find it there.

Standing behind Ron's chair, and putting her hands on that chair back, she spoke over his head to declare to the rest of the class, "However, if you know that someone is a hurtful, heartless, demeaning, worthless jerk that has never and will never change, you know better than to marry him and give him a chance to trap you in that miserable marriage." She patted Ron on the head, and the clueless jerk didn't even realize that she'd just insulted him (although all the girls in the class except Student/Hermione were giggling).

Ah, Student/Hermione actually resented her saying things like that about her friend! It would be tragic if her future self didn't know she'd be clued in by Luna to some of Ron's backbiting. As it stood it was hilarious!

Smiling far more serenely now, Hermione/Trelawney drifted on soft steps around the room, still instructing, "That is why it is far better to know what is, or has been, than what will be. Predict the future too perfectly and it can be a trap. Predict the past or present with perfect accuracy, however, and all you have gained is knowledge. Often knowledge that can be productively used to prevent an unpleasant future."

Shaking herself out of the odd whim that had caused her to wax poetic about a subject she knew next to nothing about, and wondering where those words had come from in the first place as she'd never thought of them before saying them (and had forgotten that part of this lesson), the girl acting as Trelawney busied herself, hurrying around to her desk and awkwardly fiddling around for a moment before sliding back into comforting bossiness.

"Now, who can tell me what the uses of palmistry are? Susan?"

The Hufflepuff girl smirked at her performance. "Couldn't you tell ahead of time that I wouldn't know the answer to that question?"

The class erupted in giggles, and some male laughter.

Hermione/Trelawney just smiled winningly back. "Of course! That is why I asked it." Seeing herself now surrounded by pale faces, she once again got seized upon by a strange urge and waxed poetic. "I could tell you all what your grades were going to be, not just in this subject but any others. Yet what is the use in that? Since I avoid absolute predictions they would not be locked in place, and those I told would have high grades might slack off on the confidence that gave them and not actually achieve them. While those I told would do poorly might not put in any effort at all and learn nothing! What is the point in my writing down marks in my gradebook before you even show up? No, I am not here in the capacity of a fortune teller, but as a teacher. That means I am more likely to single you out if you have not studied, on the hopes of getting you to cover the material to avoid shame the next time!"

Twirling a finger lazily around the top of her crystal ball, Hermione/Trelawney gave an unfriendly smirk to the class. "No, you will do your homework, or you will learn that I know every dirty secret you ever did, even things you've forgotten, and have no compunctions at all about embarrassing you in front of the rest of your peers."

Faces had gone white all around her.

'So much for the easy grade,' Ron whispered to Justin. 'This just become a hard class.'

Shaking herself once more as the odd urge of whimsy departed, the girl posing as their teacher once again centered herself in the material she'd memorized. "Now Miss Granger. You know the uses of palmistry. Ten points to Gryffindor, and would you kindly tell the rest of us?"

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Hermione/Trelawney stood in Dumbledore's office, having forgotten to leave she'd been having so much fun, and gotten so caught up in teaching classes that the elves found her before she'd left the castle.

Strangely, Trelawney seemed to have a dedicated House Elf assigned to her. It wasn't her elf, she couldn't command it any more than any staff member could command any Hogwarts elf, and probably less than most. Hermione was smart enough to figure out the creature was probably part of the security arrangement Dumbledore had around his precious seer. Fortunately, the little creature seemed to expect Trelawney to be confused, so the undercover girl's first startled and confused reactions to it were taken as normal.

So in a way it was good that she got surprised, as she couldn't have planned to have those reactions, and if they were normal not doing them would've brought down suspicion upon her.

Actually, Hermione would've preferred to have avoided the situation entirely, and had tried to leave several times. However no sooner did

one class end than ten minutes later another began, and between lingering students who hung around chatting with each other, or wanted to ask her questions about their assignments (or boys, a surprising number of girls wanted her to make love predictions for them) there had been no opportunity to slip out between the official periods, and then Trelawney had apparently built up her own cult of devoted up-and-coming future fortune tellers who spent lunch with her as a head start on their early afternoon private lessons together.

She'd been locked in all day until the House Elf arrived to take her away to Dumbledore's office. Now she was stuck there, waiting for the Headmaster to arrive, unable to stop a guilty feeling clawing at the bottom of her tum, sure that she'd been discovered.

The poor girl had no idea that Dumbledore was as yet unaware of her switch or the abduction of his true oracle, and that he'd merely called her there for a prediction. Also that in spite of her memory being tampered with, the lady had a lingering apprehension of the Headmaster and his office, left over in her subconscious despite all those memory wipes.

So Trelawney fretting nervously and acting apprehensive in his office was perfectly normal behavior for the Divination teacher.

Sadly, Hermione was unaware that her act had been perfect, to this point, and was anxiously fretting, unaware that she was upholding her act perfectly by doing so, and wondering if she'd given herself away by telling all of 'her' prize pupils at those private lessons in detail about Snape's deaths that day - well in advance of those deaths actually happening.

The disguised Hermione was tying herself up in knots of nerves when a house elf popped in, one of the Headmaster's personal ones, and began setting out the Headmaster's tea.

Belatedly, the girl realized that she'd worked through lunch with Trelawney's star pupils, and that Potions class came afterwards - the very Potions class Snape had died in. The Headmaster was most probably late dealing with that. Harry did say that it took some dark rituals to recover from.

Fighting down her nerves, knowing it was going to be a while before the old man came back to his office to expose and question her, Hermione turned to the elf before it could leave and pointed to the Headmaster's bookshelves. "Do you mind if I read while I wait?"

The elf thought it over for a moment, as if consulting someone via telepathy or something, before nodding. "Mistress can read."

Grabbing a book while the elf vanished, the disguised Hermione flung herself down on her padded guest chair and cracked open the volume, almost not caring what it was.

Then she spied the Headmaster's tea, all laid out for him.

Slowly, almost unable to believe her own daring, the girl reached into her pocket and withdrew her invisibility cloak, copy of Harry's. Shrunken like this, it looked almost like a pocket handkerchief. Especially with the collar parts crumpled up in her hand it looked like just a square scrap of cloth.

Dipping it several times in the Headmaster's tea, she wiped a spot of grime on the cover of her book, as if trying to remove it, then fanned herself with the damp cloth as if to sooth her troubled brow, before replacing the cloak in her pocket and settling down to read.

Now she had a chance, not much of one, she knew. But some was better than none. And at this point, with Trelawney gone, even if Hermione got destroyed Harry would still have a chance. That, too, was a source of comfort.

Very shortly she got absorbed in the book. It was rare, and a very good one.

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Albus Dumbledore loved information. The more of it he had, the more powerful it made him, and the more easily he could detect other's schemes, plan to take advantage of them or counter with his own, and predict what people would do. It was at the heart and core of his

control of the magical world. So he strained even his expanded capacity to absorb information and packed himself to the gills with sources constantly feeding him.

It was unfortunate in one aspect - once he'd fallen behind, like having been taken out by a poisoned chicken bone (mere sleep did not stop him from processing the information flow, but unconsciousness out of severe wounds or poisoning did), it was doubly difficult to catch back up to where he ought to have been without that interruption.

And, to compound that disaster, the first days of school everyone was more talkative than usual, so there was more information to be learned. So he was more behind than usual, at a time of year he regularly lagged behind.

To use a metaphor, his mental inbox was crammed full, and it would be some time after things settled down that he could deal with it all. But to him every scrap was precious, and would be dealt with in good time.

The priority alerts he would listen to first, and one of the abnormal signals he got during the first day after his recovery was to check in on Severus Snape, who'd died unaccountably in his classroom trying to mind rape Harry.

The Headmaster had been dealing with the Potter Problem, and his sudden and entirely unwelcome changes, as well as his newly closer relationship to a potential 'twice golden watcher'. He'd only just called for an elf to take Trelawney down from her quarters for a prediction so he could deal with the problem teenager when the call came in from the castle about Severus.

Trelawney would have to wait in his office until he returned.

Dealing with his Potion Master's sudden execution raised certain questions, none of which Dumbledore had time to properly delve into, as Trelawney became a complete wreck if left alone in his quarters too long. He knew she was unaware of why she reacted so negatively to him, though it did keep her from coming down to take meals in the Great Hall too often; which he found convenient, as it limited her

scope of movements rather sharply to stay in her tower virtually all of the time.

But, due to the things he had to do to her mind to keep her unaware of her own predictions, it was unavoidable that she feel unaccountably leery of him and nervous in his presence - or anxious trapped in his office, and if he left her there too long she could grow too distressed to make a prophecy for him despite all of the spells of Delphi in his arsenal.

A terrified mind closes up and shuts down, and if she did succumb to her well earned apprehensions waiting for him there would be nothing he could do to her to make her predict a way to reassert his control over Harry until she had calmed down, which could take days.

So after raising Professor Snape, and being raised in turn, the Headmaster hurried back to his office to get that prediction done so he could set his plans against Harry in motion, before rushing off to investigate what had killed poor Severus.

Egad! Already so far behind, when there was so much to be investigated! And nothing could be put to rest until he had wrung every scrap of detail from it!

Dumbledore entered his office and spied his tea set. Casting a quick warming charm he gratefully drank deeply of his cup, desperately needing the calming potions the elves included for him, as well as other potions for reinforcement to his grandfatherly persona, thus avoiding further upset to Trelawney. He could not afford to shut her down before he got that prophecy he needed!

Hermione/Trelawney secretly twinkled, face down in her book, knowing that the Headmaster had just drunk malaclaw venom released into his tea from when she'd dipped her cloak in it.

If HE was unlucky, she now stood a chance.

Dumbledore drank confidently, knowing that the portraits would've warned him if anyone tried doctoring his food with any potions, pills or powders. Then he got straight to work.

Contrary to her expectations, the Headmaster drew his wand (which, as she had half-expected from what she'd learned earlier, was Elder) and without a word of preamble, cast a spell on her in Greek.

The girl immediately resolved to learn that tongue as her next language lozenge.

Dumbledore followed with more waves of his wand and Greek, then demanded in English, "Speak! Oracle, speak! Harry Potter grows more troublesome by the day. Tell me how I might return him to my control!"

The Headmaster then jabbed his wand at her and spoke more Greek.

A strange lassitude came over the girl. Feeling like she was in a dream, the girl found that she was being pushed to say something, but hadn't the foggiest notion what to say.

Then a bit of whimsy gave her an idea. No sooner had it entered her head than whatever magic force was on her seized upon it, and Hermione threw her head back and declared:

"The webs of an old, white bumblebee
have caught a green-eyed lion.
But a chicken sets it free.

"Snake and bumblebee both stung lion
but their venom loses potency.

"Bumblebee revealed as spider, and snake to be a worm.
Chicken hunts spider, preys upon both bug and worm."

Albus scowled, for many reasons. For one, it had been a long time since his oracle had been so clear, there was virtually no room for interpretation in that prophecy at all. His own name, Albus Dumbledore, when Albus was Latin for white, and Dumbledore in 18th Century English meant bumblebee, made that portion far too clear for his peace of mind. But far more troublesome was that she had used that clarity to declare bad news!

It had been ages since she'd had anything so bad to say!

Inwardly, Hermione was astonished, although she'd wisely kept all but her confusion off the face she was wearing. What she'd wanted to do was tell the old man that he was being exposed and going to die. But the words for that had come from... somewhere else.

She'd honestly expected to have to scramble for them, and they would have come out vintage Hermione, which someone who knew her surely would have recognized. But before she could think much further on that subject, the Headmaster had jabbed his wand at her and spoke more Greek, before telling her in English, "Tell me, how might the chicken be destroyed?"

Already her head was back, and she rather vindictively told him, "Neither spider nor worm have that power! Both are prey to the chicken."

Dumbledore's face paled, and he made the mistake of pondering aloud, "Not spider, nor worm... but what about the lion?" Another jab of his wand and more Greek followed. "How might the lion be induced to destroy the chicken in time to save the spider?"

One of her father's cruder statements jumped to mind and Hermione wanted to tell the old bag of bones to go piss up a rope, but somehow, she'd guess because of the magic he'd used, that came out differently.

"The lion hunts not whilst bound by webs, and the webs shall survive the spider."

Dumbledore pondered for a moment, before again casting his spell and asking, "How might the spider regain his sting and become the bumblebee once more? A creature that can evade the chicken?"

"The care of the bumblebee is not for flowers but for webs. It shall remain a spider evermore." Hermione stated strongly.

At this Dumbledore smiled to himself. "But the bumblebee has another name: Wulfric, an Anglo-Saxon term for 'wolf power', and chickens are prey to wolves. But I've pressed this enough, already going beyond the recommended three questions. My dear Sybil, we shall continue this another time, when you will tell me how to prosper as the wolf. For now... Obliviate!"

Hermione was left blinking, wondering why she recalled everything clearly just after a memory spell she was sure was meant to erase this little interview and the questions he'd asked (but more particularly, her responses to them).

She was just wondering what to do, and if the Queen's 'absolute defense against Legilimency' had anything to do with her remembering everything up to and including the Headmaster casting an Obliviate spell at her, when Albus got a message from Snape, and left the room in a rush muttering about an intrusion and coleslaw.

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Author's Notes:

Neither party is going to think of this, so I'll tell you straight out. The spells Albus uses to control his oracle and wring predictions out from her are based on a form of mind control - and mind control simply does not work on fairy creatures. Nothing that would function on mortals, anyway. They have their own rules for that sort of thing, and these spells do not apply it.

It is possible to make fey do things, but that's compulsion, not mind control. They stay fully in command of their faculties and senses while carrying out those instructions - and thus can freely interpret and twist them.

So various mind magics (as Albus specializes in) are ineffective, and things like Obliviates (a magically enforced command to forget) simply fail.

The rest of those spells for wringing predictions out of oracles, without the mind control aspect, twist and become rather weird as a

key ingredient has gone missing. If you put something other than flour in a breadmaker, you get out something other than bread.

Of course, like Harry said last chapter, those new bodies of theirs did not come with instruction booklets, so the trio are ignorant of most of their own powers.

And yes, they are true metamorphamagi. They've just had zero time to learn to use those powers - just like you can't hand someone a set of skis and a mountain and expect them to be instant, expert skiers, they are new to this and will take some time to be fully proficient. So for the meantime they have used the shortcut of polyjuice potions to learn new forms.

And, at the moment, they happen to be out of polyjuice (don't expect that to last long).

Chapter Twenty
by Lionheart

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Hermione/Trelawney stared at the Headmaster's retreating back long after it had vanished, then returned her gaze to the office. 'He doesn't know!' she thought to herself, getting a bit giddy and elated. 'He just wanted Trelawney in here to make a prediction for him! He DOESN'T KNOW I replaced her!'

Somehow that made the nigh-invulnerable seeming Headmaster just a bit more human and defeatable.

Something firmed up within the girl, and her eyes narrowed as her thought processes kicked into gear and went online, having previously been almost shut down for fear of the man.

'First order of business,' she thought to herself, 'is to secure a route of escape.'

With that thought in mind, the young lady picked herself up and went over to the large window Dumbledore had behind his desk. It let in light that didn't flicker, and cast it over the shoulders of whoever was sitting at the desk. This put it on the documents that person would be reading, and also gave him a distinct psychological advantage in interviews, to have the light behind him.

To Hermione at the moment, it was nothing more than an exit. She hadn't forgotten the shrunken broom in her pocket, nor Harry's idea of jumping out a window to fly away to safety.

Unlatching the window and swinging open both panes was not hard. However, just before she got the gumption to climb up on the sill, preparatory to jumping out, the young girl looked back at the book she'd been reading.

It was excellent.

However, the idea of keeping it and bringing it with her so she could continue reading and possibly finish it, soon exploded as she had a related thought. The Queen said that Hogwarts gave Dumbledore a unique and irreplaceable advantage, one that he couldn't get any other way. His office had to play a part in that somehow, and she would likely never be in this room again.

Steeling herself to walk casually, the young lady moved over to Dumbledore's desk and picked up a letter opener, then went back to the window, noting that if she leaned out none of the portraits could see what she was doing, and used the flat blade of the letter opener to pry out the pins on the hinges holding the panes of glass in place.

She watched both panes fall away with considerable satisfaction. She didn't doubt the window could close on the Headmaster's command, or even that the glass was unbreakable and immune to most spells. But no way was that window being closed now, so she had an avenue of escape, even if he was to come back to his office right then.

She maneuvered two chairs in front of the door that led from the stairs up from the gargoyle at the entrance, hoping he would trip on them if he came up in a rush trying to catch her. Then she went to work.

Numerous people in her small group had mentioned by now that all paintings in the castle reported to the Headmaster. So Hermione started by taking all the ones in his office down, dragging around a chair so she could reach the ones higher up, and putting them all in a wooden shipping crate transfigured out of a drink cup left over from their visit to the KFC.

Paintings couldn't report on anything they couldn't see. That much had been made clear to her by Harry's trick, treating one like a security camera. And wand use was more suspicious than any other activity, that's why she did all the removal by hand. Well, except the transfiguring.

Once she was finished packing those portraits away, the girl checked around the rest of the room and got working on those bookshelves next, doing much the same thing, packing away shelf after shelf of

books in some degree of haste, rushing as there were ever so many of them around the room! And she had no idea what was going to set off his alerts and bring him back. Each one could be the last, so she constantly hurried.

Then she eyed the Headmaster's desk. She didn't dare open any of the drawers, sure that would trigger a much stronger alarm. But stacked over its top, and a great number of flat surfaces nearby as well, was a glittering assortment of delicate silver instruments.

She didn't know what they monitored, and frankly she didn't care. That they were present was enough reason to remove them. There were any number of uses for space directly around where you are working, and a mind as brilliant as Dumbledore's wouldn't put anything in the 'glance at it to check it' range if he didn't care about what information that glance gave him. The closest stuff would be the most important, but he'd want constant updates on it all.

So they had to go.

Packing all of those silver gadgets and whirling gizmos into another box was easy if you didn't care about damaging them. In fact, she'd been rather careless about all of her packing, more concerned about haste than security for the items she was moving - It was only her life on the line, after all, and he could still return at any second, prompted by alerts already given.

Nerves fraying, and her daring coming to an end, Hermione spared the room one last glance before intending to dart to the window and safety, when her eyes lit on the Sorting Hat, and a sudden smirk graced her lips.

Dumbledore had been briefly removed by the Board of Governors last year for letting a monster in to terrorize the students. So he COULD be removed if the cause was bad enough! And what could be worse than losing a relic of the Founders, and an integral part of running the school?

Grabbing the Hat, she wadded it up to shove in her pocket, performed a switching spell to trade Trelawney's clothes for her own

fairy garments so she could go invisible (and wished she'd thought of that earlier, as she kept imagining the Headmaster rushing up here at a run, sure she'd set off a terrible number of alarms), checked to make sure she had all the right things in her pockets still, tossed her teacher's empty clothes and glasses on the desk, shrank all of the boxes she'd packed things into, transfigured them into hard candies in the hopes of throwing off any tracking charms on them, climbed up on the sill and unshrunk her broom.

Gazing back into the office, Hermione then cast her strongest wandless fire spell back into the room, leaping off into the sky as the furniture went ablaze behind her.

The silver gadgets would not shrink or transfigure, so she sped on her school broom around to the back of Hagrid's cabin, where she dumped them all in a pen he had full of nifflers, magical creatures who had a predilection for anything glittery and liked to chew on precious metals to supplement their diets. They fell on them like a pack of savage hounds. Now the Headmaster could trace those devices all he wanted, and he'd be welcome to dig through niffler droppings for the torn up scraps of them.

She did not know that among those silver devices were Dumbledore's own special edition, custom time turner, and his spare. But that was just his bad luck they got destroyed along with so much else of his equipment.

Hermione herself disappeared off into the forest, dropping the Trelawney disguise once she was well off under the trees. Behind her, in the burning office of the Headmaster, written on the wall in coleslaw stuck there with a permanent sticking charm, were the words, "The Fingerlickers were here!"

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As he was walking down to answer Snape's call Albus felt annoyed at himself for having left Trelawney in his office. She'd obviously reached her limits as to how much of it she could stand and gone into fits, to judge by the number of abnormal alarms he was getting from her. But no dangerous spells had been cast, nor anything broken,

and he simply did not have the time to deal with her right then, not even to check those alarms in detail.

Whatever she was doing, it would have to wait. Nor was this the first time she had gotten anxious to the point of insanity in his office and moved a bunch of things about, leaving a clutter as bad as her own room.

She wasn't breaking anything, and that sufficed for now. It couldn't be bad, as she was hardly using her wand at all.

The House Elves could fix it all up in moments, he was sure. So whatever nonsense had gotten in to her otherwise empty skull was of no concern to him while dealing with the present emergency.

Priorities were the only way to live under the information load he had himself under. Otherwise everything would get interrupted and nothing would ever be done. His castle would just fill with half-completed projects.

Correctly determining those priorities, which emergency to deal with first, took a great deal of luck, or, as Dumbledore flattered himself, a perceptive mind. But he trusted his own judgment, as it had never failed him before.

Why would it have the bad luck to do so now, of all times?

Dumbledore's face smoothed as the warnings from the paintings grew fewer and fewer. Perhaps she was calming down. That was excellent, as it gave him fewer distraction for dealing with the serious matters to hand.

Severus had reported a break-in to Hogwarts - one that Albus had not planned!

Arriving with haste in his Potion Master's office, Dumbledore saw Severus standing near his cabinet of saleable wares and performing tests on some substance he'd removed from out of one of those bottles.

"I came directly on receipt of your message, Severus. What has happened?"

Professor Snape turned around to greet him, his face a mask of upset and confusion. But they trusted each other, and Snape spoke quickly. "I came in late this morning. As you know, I've been using all my spare time in attempts to identify the poison used on you. Between that and my normal classes, I've not had time for my side business. However, as I came in after the... incident in my first year class this afternoon, I noticed something odd."

He held out a small vial to the Headmaster. "Do you recognize this?"

Dumbledore peered over his glasses at the substance. "It appears to be some sort of crude, vegetable slurry."

Severus nodded. "It is. So far I've identified it as a mixture of shredded raw cabbage, shredded carrots, some oils, and a few other ingredients I could not imagine the purpose of. It all seems rather senseless, but I find that half a dozen of my potions are missing - replaced by this substance, as well as other saleable wares."

Albus took the vial and inspected it more closely. But as Severus had said, it appeared to be primarily shredded cabbage and oils. Looking over his glasses at his friend, he asked, "Have you identified any of its properties?"

Snape scowled, moving over to his desk. "I did the usual test, of course, snagging some third year muggleborn, a Hufflepuff this time, and forcing a dose down her. All she said was that it reminded her of visiting her cousin's home in the Colonies."

Neither party had to state that she'd been Obliviated afterwards, or that should some disaster have happened, she would've been handed off to Madam Pomfrey with some made-up story about how she'd been experimenting with potions unsupervised and it had gone wrong.

They had several such 'cases' a year, more when they needed a greater number of test subjects. Muggleborn testing was a priceless tool in their research, after all.

A bit messy when they exploded, but it was all for the Greater Good.

The best part was that it created an anti-muggleborn prejudice among the school officers and board, as they kept seeing so many results of careless activities no pureblood would do. And, since it was the student being blamed for what was supposedly their own fault, it caused next to no ruckus for the school in general when a few muggleborns died that way.

It was the unexplained deaths that caused so many problems, when ancient monsters roamed the halls and future dark lords painted threats on walls. When Albus was the cause, or Snape was, they always had a ready excuse to blame on the student, sealing the case with no fuss and no hassle.

No, the practice held immeasurable benefits, not the least of which was a few less muggleborns polluting the magical world. But also there were the potential research benefits. Dumbledore could not have discovered twelve uses of dragon's blood without it!

Although more than a few muggleborns had dissolved during testing, as far as he was concerned, that was just another benefit. Making McGonagall tell the parents their kids had been careless and it was all their own fault for dying still caused him to cackle into his pillow some nights.

She couldn't use those words, of course. But that was the definite spirit conveyed, "Your child screwed up doing something dangerous and killed him or herself," when the only dangerous thing they'd done was trust the Headmaster and go to Hogwarts.

No, it still had him giggling sometimes.

"So this points to the Americas, then?" Dumbledore thought of a good half dozen reasons why that might be, involving plots so esoteric that no one outside of he even knew they were going on.

"There's more," Snape hesitated, then gathered himself and plunged on. "I found slight smears, traces only you understand, of another substance on the bottles and tools involved in the theft, and the cabinet door handles."

Dumbledore looked at him curiously, waiting for him to explain, and Snape did not disappoint, hesitating only a bit before answering, "It was chicken grease, Headmaster. Someone handled my tools who had been handling fried chicken before - and more, I've identified the same eleven herbs and spices in it as was used in your wound to poison you."

The Headmaster paled. "Severus, are you sure?" On receiving a nod he sat down to steady himself. "The Dark Colonel. This is grave news."

"Why?" Snape raised an eyebrow. "You've dealt with upstarts before."

Dumbledore nodded, but considering the latest prophecies... he could not keep this information from his most trusted assistant. "Severus, I have reason to believe that neither myself, nor Voldemort, could defeat this Colonel Sanders. You can be sure I am looking into options."

Snape considered that silently for a while. "What of the Potter brat?"

Albus shook his head. "Alas, he may not be relied upon either. The necessary treatments of him may have rendered him unable. This, also, I will look into further, as I feel there may be some way around our present restrictions."

He raised a stricken face to his old friend. "What was taken?"

The Potions Master answered in a businesslike tone. "Four doses of polyjuice, my entire collection of hairs, but strangely no Aging Potion. Then also a dose of Unctuous Uncion and a bottle of Shocktox."

Albus was nodding. Aging Potion was taken along with polyjuice by the less deplorable of Snape's 'special customers' wanting a liaison with a publicly known figure to make the resulting subject of legal age - as the hairs were all gathered during school years, the resultant form was always underage, and Aging Potion was a solution to that, for those who cared about such things.

Granger was one of those gathered, as they could say with a certain amount of confidence that with her drive and abilities she would be famous someday and now, in school, was the only opportunity to gather hairs. Most Slytherins had enough ambition to obtain some office. But Harry Potter was already Snape's best seller. Only witches generally wanted to age him a bit.

Albus himself couldn't see what the problem was, and preferred his little boys little, before they got unpleasantly hairy. That was back in the day when such things mattered, of course. He no longer had such appetites.

"That would point to someone who wanted to subdue a person, make them their friend, and then possibly impersonate them, or have them impersonate someone else out of your collection of hairs. Interesting." Albus rubbed his beard in thought.

"But Albus, why wasn't I notified? The customer alarm did nothing."

Dumbledore was nodding, having already reviewed that information. "The portraits I had along that access route saw nothing, so our intruders must have been invisible. Fear not, however, as I have a rare and difficult to obtain device covering this area that is able to detect and record even that. Sadly, this type does not interface well with others, so I could not have it alert me to this intrusion in real time. However, we may check the recordings."

The pair of men moved out into the corridor, out along the route set up so customers could gain access to Snape's services. There, in a dingy part of the castle that was heavily shadowed, Albus stopped.

Conjuring a stepladder, Dumbledore scaled high up an otherwise dank and narrow wall, reached into a secret cubby, and climbed down, holding a bare skull like it was some form of treasure.

Snape raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Both men knew what it was. A skull of a wizard who died with his eyes open could be enchanted to serve as a guardian of sorts - a Watch Skull. However doing that was supremely illegal in spite of its effectiveness, as using a man's mortal remains in a necromantic ritual of that sort always caused his spirit to rest uneasy.

That didn't stop Dumbledore from doing it. In fact, he was responsible for the ghost population being so high in recent years, as uneasy spirits often rose as ghosts, and most of them came to Hogwarts where he found use for them as additional eyes and ears.

Watch skulls were prized by dark wizards as guardians, being able to sense the invisible, as well as spirits. But using them was supremely illegal, as well as risky. Ghosts could scent them, and would seek them out to expose them so they could be destroyed and the spirits tied to them put to rest. So Albus could not fill the castle with them. In fact he must have warded this section of corridor against any ghosts entering - not something he was willing to do for large areas of Hogwarts.

But, for the occasional watch post, useful all the same.

Albus stroked the skull and whispered a few spells, then the empty sockets glowed and projected a scene that both wizards watched in silence, seeing two invisible and anonymous people enter, then pass.

The two thought nothing of the clothes the images were wearing. Invisibility-anything was rare. Cloaks were the most common garments that offered it, but people would take it in whatever form they could obtain regardless of shape, style or fashion.

Besides, to them, the clothes could even be trendy. They were certainly nice looking enough, and wizards didn't care about dated styles.

"I don't recognize them," Snape declared once the image was over. "Were they before my time? Or did they not go to school here?" He was expecting to hear the intruders names, along with detailed histories.

He got disappointed.

Albus was slowly shaking his head. "No Severus, I do not know them. It is even possible they may have been muggles."

"Muggles?" the Head of Slytherin scoffed. "Impossible!"

"Ah! But see. This stone here, Severus, is the alarm stone. It registers the magical strength of any witch or wizard passing over it, and sounds an alert for you to be ready to receive customers, and yet looking here at what it has recorded, it shows nothing, not even at the exact time the skull shows our intruders passed. No one with a human magical core in their bodies entered despite what our bony friend has shown us."

"Then how did that cabbage mess get into my potion cabinet?"

"Ah, Severus," Albus breathed with a twinkle in his eye at the sleuthing he loved so much. "I believe we may have been invaded by a pair of muggles, which should be impossible. But it is clear they have no human magical core in their bodies. So either they are muggles, or some form of magical beast that had taken the form of humans. Both are tremendously implausible, yet one or the other seems to have occurred. Yet the skull does not show them leaving, which I find odd. Come, let us check the skull in your office."

Snape had long since given up on achieving any degree of privacy in this castle run by a man obsessed with spying on everything, but even he found it slightly off-putting to know that the Headmaster checked his moves that closely.

After replacing that skull, they went back into the office where Dumbledore retrieved another, similarly hidden. Through its projected ghostly images they saw the pair of presumed muggles enter, inspect the cabinet, steal polyjuice and hairs, drink it to become two students, then enter the castle proper.

Albus, noticing what Snape did not, and possessing a keen eye for detail, had seen a face of a white bearded muggle, along with the letters 'KFC' on the package they'd used to transport that cabbage mess.

"Don't tell me that was Potter and Granger?" Snape snarled.

Albus shook his head, grinning in full grandfather mode even as he suppressed awareness of a damage alarm occurring in his office. "No. That's just what they want us to think. Did you not see them drink your polyjuice, Severus? Do you not have hairs collected from Harry and Miss Granger? No, they needed access to our school, and chose two students to get it. Two students, I might add, that I have been having unusual difficulties tracking of late. They could have gone almost anywhere, and I not been aware of it."

Anywhere, that is, except certain sensitive places. But Snape did not need to be aware of that.

His eyes twinkled as he further inspected his wards. He had another alarm stone, set to keep Snape's customers from entering the school proper, and it registered the familiar magical cores of two of his students. Amazing. He had not previously experimented with the use of polyjuice on muggles. Perhaps it was now time to start?

The duplication was flawless on the surface of it. Quite remarkable.

Suddenly the accounts of damage to his office became too great to ignore. Albus sent an elf to go send Trelawney back to her tower, but the creature popped back in moments, burned and cringing, weeping as it informed him that it could not find her there, or anywhere.

Shocked, Dumbledore had to excuse himself to go check on this himself and discover what was up with so many alarms going off in an office no one had been permitted to enter but his oracle.

What he found when he got there was an office ablaze, and words written on the wall in charred cabbage slurry spelling out an obscure yet threatening message, that his enemies (for what else could they be?) had penetrated even to this very sanctuary!

Dumbledore'd had no need to fear the fire, standing unharmed amidst the blaze, as he'd made himself immune to that long ago using a ritual starring a certain forgotten goblet in the basement.

Fawkes flamed in and caught him, getting the old man out of there before the burning timbers of his office roof came down and crushed him.

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Author's Notes:

Ok, I had to admit I had fun with that. A bit difficult to pull off, but worth it in my opinion.

Oh, and I forgot to say this in a previous author's notes, so I will here. If Dumbledore hadn't gotten greedy, and in his haste grabbed incautiously for a prized magical artifact he'd long coveted, and doing so fell into a deadly trap, he would not have needed to activate his escape plan of having Snape kill him, and would have been around to see Harry's death and personally benefit from that grand final sacrifice of Harry's life Dumbledore spent so long arranging, and gotten hold of Lily's gift of protection himself while it was distributed to those at Hogwarts - including Harry's enemies (like Snape and Draco).

So those fan predictions about Dumbledore planning to sacrifice Harry to increase his own fame and power were bang on the money, and he was going to steal Lily's gift for himself and his cronies (oddly including a rather large number of people who'd hated and abused Harry for years) in the bargain.

To take something without consent is stealing, and Albus never asked. And don't joke about Harry having a choice in that matter. By the time he was even aware of what was going on he'd already been backed into a corner by the Master Manipulator, who'd done his best to close off all other options.

No, Rowling started out with a hero, and turned him into a patsy, one who was messed up enough in the head to name his children after his worst abusers. It's enough to make ya sick.

So Dumbledore can either be seen as a little evil, or a lot, and as I'm sure you've noticed in this story he is leaning toward a lot. But evil, like it or not, is often a package deal, and those who give in to one aspect of it often find themselves acquiring others.

And I don't think it needs repeating, but I will anyway, the only reason they are succeeding in any operations against him at all are that he was caught unprepared by their blitzkrieg. As a prepared opponent, Dumbledore is all but unstoppable.

Chapter Twenty-One

by Lionheart

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Harry was carefully revising his opinions on what made for a successful Dark Lord. The two best examples he knew of, Voldemort and Dumbledore, had exhibited traits, to a greater or lesser degree, out of all four Houses.

Did they both have power? Yes. In fact, both were counted among the most powerful wizards of the age.

Did they both have knowledge? Yes, they did. Each was well acquainted with obscure or otherwise unknown bits of magic, rituals and so on, as well as less magic-oriented areas of knowledge like politics.

Both had glory, of their own sorts. Voldemort as the 'Heir of Slytherin' and Dumbledore as the 'Defeater of Grindelwald.'

They both had followers, and they both worked hard.

The difference seemed to be in the emphasis. Voldemort really liked power, and his whole focus was on gaining more of that for himself while denying it to others; while Dumbledore spent a fanatical amount of effort on hoarding knowledge the same way, so their types were still clearly evident.

If one were to contrast this with, say Gilderoy Lockhart, then one could see that while the former DADA professor had mastery of the secrets of one House sewn up, he really had accumulated an amazing degree of glory, he'd neglected the others quite badly. He knew nothing, had no personal power... although he had been working, rather successfully, on building up his fan club.

So, at most, Lockhart scored only half points on the Dark Lord contest.

Perhaps he needed another category? Because the fop really hadn't counted for much of a 'lord' of anything. A poser, yes. Annoying, yes, and influential, yes. Not much of a powerful force like your typical Dark Lord was, but still influential enough to be counted a player.

Lockhart could get people to do things, just not on the same sort of scale as one of the major players on that field like Dumbledore or Voldemort.

Yes. Harry was thinking that he really should reserve the term 'lord' for someone who had all of the basics covered - personal power, knowledge, a reputation, and the loyalty of others.

Actually, that kind of brought him up short, as he'd inherited one of the best and brightest reputations there was. His title 'Boy-Who-Lived' was one of the most far-reaching and influential out there. Even those who'd never heard of Dumbledore's defeat of Grindelwald knew about the boy who'd survived the killing curse. And, coming kind of hand in hand with that, was the fact that certain folks admired Harry enough to offer him a certain degree of loyalty.

So the Boy-Who-Lived had come into the magical world with as many basics covered as Lockhart; and the same basics, ironically.

Rather spooky, really.

Then Voldemort's soul fragment had provided the rest: the knowledge to make the most out of his personal power. Harry shuddered, actually kind of scared at that concept, thinking that he himself now scored high enough on his own personal charts to have entered the game on a big league scale.

Even if he was by far the most junior player in this three way war.

Still, he had to be grateful he had that much to call his own, as both the other major players had singled him out and individually targeted him for destruction.

Given an opportunity to strike an irreparable blow to the power of one of them (even if the man would still have plenty of power left over)

Harry did not waste any time. When he left the tower with the real Trelawney they went out the nearest way that did not look immediately suspicious, and from there flew directly over to the heart of the Forbidden Forest, back to the pond with the Fairy Queen shrine.

Even as they landed, Harry felt quiet dread over the prospect of returning to the island at the center of that lake, and concluded that dread was a warning not to go back.

Come to think of it - they hadn't been invited back. Instead they'd been told to look for a potion on the outer shores of that small lake. So they did, quickly circling it together.

The clearing was just as packed as before. The trio had not been gone long and the creatures had no reason to leave, as there were just as many dangers outside the hedge as before. It would have been more efficient to split up and circle the lake with Trelawney going one way while he went the other. Doing that they could have traversed the distance in half the time. But Harry didn't dare risk it.

Dumbledore had a phoenix and their flame transport ability crossed all known wards and was undetectable by magical means. Since the bird had been used to deliver letters before, Harry could only assume that Dumbledore had put the same tracking charms on Fawkes as were used on post owls.

Harry did not have a phoenix familiar (nor, obviously, did Tom), so he could not say with any certainty what they could or could not do. So that meant they were in very real danger of Dumbledore simply appearing at any moment wherever they were, flame-transported by Fawkes.

Since that was a danger, distance was not much of a friend. So Harry was very relieved when, after traversing three-quarters of the lake's perimeter, they found a place where the boardwalk had been rerouted to leave a clear circle right on the shore of the pond. Dead center in this clear area was a golden vial, with a note attached.

As he and Trelawney (still in her disguise as Hermione, they not having stopped to change her back - if even there was a way for

normal witches to counter polyjuice before the time ran out) ran toward the bottle Harry saw that it was not the container that was gold, that was merely glass. No, it was the liquid inside that was a solid gold color.

He snatched it up, half-afraid one of the many beasts around them would beat them to it, and instantly handed it off to Trelawney, saying, "Here, drink this!"

The teacher smiled at him out of Hermione's face, and Harry had an odd moment as she acted with total trust in him, just as his real friend would've. But before this attack of conscience could cause him any regrets Trelawney had already drunk the contents of the vial.

There came a vast anticlimactic moment when nothing happened.

Harry blinked, as their only instructions had been to, 'Bring her to this pond, dose her with a potion you shall find on the shores when you return.' Already thinking that perhaps that was some remedy against the Headmaster scrying or finding her, or perhaps some potion to release her from his mental control and that they would have to take it from there, his brain kicked into gear and began planning for contingencies.

Harry's first series of letters sent on that trip where he'd taken Pettigrew to the Ministry for registration as a pet had been the opening salvos in a multi-stage process he'd planned for creating a support base and gathering supplies. Voldemort's memories had shown him how cruel the magical world could be, and so he'd begun to arrange a series of safe houses, refuges and materials stockpiles in preparation for a life on the run from muggle and magical authorities, in case that should ever prove necessary.

Only a heartbeat after having seen her drink the gold potion and had nothing happen, Harry was already plotting to go personally ram through one of those planned safe houses to completion, so he could store her there safe from the Headmaster's control, when Trelawney threw back her head and vomited forth a shaft of golden light straight up to the heavens.

Then her hair turned green, and her toes transformed into roots that began sinking themselves down in the soft ground beneath her. Harry realized, in an odd moment of introspection, that she was standing right at the center of the cleared space that the newly revised boardwalk circled around, as her limbs flung outwards and leaves sprung out from her fingertips.

Trelawney, still using Hermione's mortal face, smiled at him winningly just before her whole body morphed into a small tree, that quickly began shooting upwards as it reached for its full adult growth in seconds.

'White Oak', a dry, dispassionate corner of his mind remarked as he watched the transformation. 'The oldest of all Greek oracles, the shrine at Dodona, consisted of a holy oak. Though it never eclipsed the oracle at Delphi, many notable magical artifacts were constructed out of timber spirited away from Dodona - most notably the Argo, ship used by Jason and the Argonauts.'

"Your Queen was most generous to her," Firenze, the centaur who had helped him in his first year stepped up beside Harry.

'By turning her into a tree?' Harry thought. But he stifled that and aimed for a more diplomatic reaction to this unexpected company. "Well... Dumbledore ought to have a harder time kidnapping her now."

"This is really amazing!" Hermione's voice came from behind him. Harry spun around to see Hermione and Luna were there, just coming out from under invisibility and offering him smiles.

"Your future self offered us a pair of Time Turners and told us to spin back, that we didn't want to miss this - You were right." Hermione told him.

"Anyone want to clue me in? I seem to have missed the significance of this," Harry told them right back, earning a few startled glances.

It was Luna who answered. "You'd find out in a moment, when Sybil stepped forth from her new tree. Our Divination teacher is now a dryad, transformed by order of the Queen."

Hermione nodded happily, eyes still on the swiftly growing pure-white barked oak. "Yes! Do you recall what the Queen said to us? That adding extra of an element to an already living thing is one of the most terrifying, dreadful, and yet beautiful things possible in magic, and usually only seen in nymphs? Well, a dryad is a wood-nymph, infused with extra of the Earth element, just like naiads are especially strong with Water. I looked it up back at Hogwarts."

Firenze was nodding. "Oak, a symbol for strength and endurance. Truly she is blessed by your Queen."

Luna smiled, her own eyes still on the steadily growing tree. "A dryad's life is inextricably bound to her peculiar tree, and it is impossible for her to truly be destroyed so long as it, any tree descended from it, or any of its seeds, still exists." She turned an otherworldly gaze on Harry for a brief instant. "Even so, her tree represents her only weakness, so most dryads are careful to keep its identity a secret."

Harry blinked several times as he was fed information outside both Riddle's experience and his own, and he now understood how privileged he was being to watch this particular tree take form. Already plans for defending it had begun taking shape in his mind.

A sudden shower of acorns covered them as the tree bloomed and fruited in under a second, sending down a rain of seeds. Thousands of fairies acting under orders of the Queen, rushed forward to scoop up armfuls of them and sped on glowing wings off into the depths of the Forbidden Forest to hide in out of the way pockets and corners.

It would be impossible for even the most skilled and knowledgeable mage in the world to track them all, or find out where they had hidden every seed.

Harry frowned, almost petulantly, knowing there was no need for his rapidly burgeoning dryad defense plans now that she had so many seeds hidden all over. "Still, she's a tree."

The centaur now spared him a short glance. "A dryad can leave her state to become mortal at any time, all she must do is choose to do so. But once lost her immortality is gone forever. This is no prison that holds her bound, but a rare privilege not to be seen again for many lifetimes. The birth of a new dryad is as scarce an event as the birth of a new phoenix, instead of the rebirth of an old one."

"There are many similarities," Luna softly nodded. "If the physical body of a phoenix is destroyed it is instantly reborn from its ashes. Should the body of a dryad be destroyed, she is reborn out of her tree. And within the woods that bear her home, a dryad is as adroit and agile as any unicorn, making her almost impossible to catch unless she chooses to be caught. This, plus her immortality, places her forever beyond the Headmaster's control. Trelawney is now truly free."

After the shower of golden acorns, Trelawney stepped forth as a dryad - and she still looked, barring certain features like green hair, identical to the mortal form of Hermione.

Harry blushed. "Oops," he apologized. "I guess we could have waited for the polyjuice to wear off before doing this."

The true Hermione smirked. "All of the Headmaster's damage and meddling of her was removed, but the potions you gave her will never wear off. They were part of her when she changed, and not included in the Queen's removal program (which was aimed at the harm did her by the Headmaster), so they are now part of her forever."

"I hope you don't mind her sharing your appearance," Harry apologized.

"No," Luna smiled. "Her appearance is not the problem. It is the fact that you didn't let the Unctuous Unction wear off before you changed her."

"HARRY!" The world's newest dryad flung herself on the boy, covering him in hugs and kisses.

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It was now unlikely that Dumbledore would ever find out what happened to his now-former Divination teacher, much less get her back. And even if he did find out her fate, she now possessed multiple layers of defense around her - she was in the hedged area around the shrine, so automatically powerful magics prevented creatures of darkness or those of ill will from penetrating that far. Yet even should his phoenix transport him past those wards she still possessed other defenses.

A dryad was far from helpless. She was not as unbeatable in her terrain as a naiad, but still possessed potent abilities if pressed. A dryad's senses of her surroundings were uncanny, and being virtually impossible to hit if she was dodging and immune to mind control as a fairy creature made her distinctly hard to catch, even should the Headmaster find her. But having satyrs in the woods made it so any nymph at all was engaged in a never ending game of hide and seek, so she'd get PLENTY of practice evading unwanted notice, and satyrs had some pretty potent abilities of their own for finding hidden girls. So it was safe to say that soon she'd become expert at using those natural abilities of hers, and catching her would be almost as hard as finding her, and both would be almost impossible if she did want to be found.

Frankly most nymphs only got caught when they got bored, and it would be a couple of centuries before Trelawney had to fear that. Then, having so many of her seeds hidden throughout the forest by the fairies also made it so she did not have to fear death, so most threats and traps were useless.

Not being able to either kill or control her left any potential enslaver of the new nymph extremely few options. And, as they quickly discovered, Sybil had kept her magical core through this transformation. Since her body, too, had been removed and replaced by a fey one, doubtless for that to happen the Queen had to have

done something much like the teens had received, with her human magic core moved to and merged with her spirit.

That made her possibly the only dryad in the world able to cast spells as any witch could, and made her harder still to catch or control.

Harry, frankly, had to admit this defense of the oracle was better than any he might've arranged. His powers were all spells and tricks well known to the Dark Ravenclaw, even if Albus was as yet unappraised of the fact that Harry could use them. But this... turning her into a dryad was not something the Headmaster could just expect. It came out of left field and crossed enough boundaries of magic as to have been completely unpredictable.

The unknown or unknowable were the most difficult things to counter, and Dumbledore no longer had an oracle feeding him advice about secrets he could not pry into any other way. That left him to rely on mortal methods, and the only mortals to witness this were... not exactly mortal anymore. So long as the trio never spoke of this at Hogwarts or spoke of it to any human the secret should stay secret forever.

Well, forever might be pushing it, but a long time at any rate. Heck, as fast as Dumbledore knew most things, Harry'd settle for a couple of weeks - long enough to get Fawkes out from under his control; and without a phoenix to transport him past the defensive magic inherent in the hedge, Dumbledore ought to be all but helpless in any attempts to approach or regain her.

He'd still try to employ agents, of course. But the magic of this sanctuary denied access to any who would harm those already within, and well-meaning harm was still harm. So anyone acting on his orders ought to be hedged out, even if they did not know their actions would ultimately be used to harm her.

He'd still try to use proxies, because that was how he did most of his work, but tricking unknowing agents this deep into deadly dangerous woods so they could innocently stumble in here, past all the guardians, and do something that would be an advantage to him

would be a difficult machination, which is not to say he wouldn't try, only that it would be a while before he'd succeed.

Actually, put in those terms, Harry himself would probably be the first patsy he'd try, as that was exactly the sort of thing the Headmaster had been using him for until now, and Albus wasn't aware that situation had changed.

Harry could even play along with that, and mysteriously fail those missions, to delay Dumbledore using any other agents if nothing else.

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Harry noted his own future self had spun back with the rest of them, and the newly minted dryad's attention had slipped to the older him. Since the group of future selves was about to launch into a big discussion centering around the Queen's note, present Harry slipped away. He'd hear all of it later, right now he had errands to go take care of to make that meeting even possible.

First item on the agenda was to obtain some time turners, and that meant a trip to the Department of Mysteries.

Fortunately for him, Voldemort had worked there, and even if they'd changed the locks on the doors, so to speak, that intimate familiarity with the place gave him an innate advantage in penetrating their defenses.

The early morning hour also helped him there. Having just rushed Trelawney to the woods, it was not long after they'd first entered her tower, and that was only an hour or so past dawn.

Luna was correct in stating that most shops in Diagon Alley didn't open until well after breakfast. That was not an aberration, among wizards it was a well established trend. They loved their comforts and convenience, and having to get up early for an early morning rush was uncomfortable - especially when your customer base was made up of self-indulgent slug-abeds who'd lay in until a comfortable hour, and thus not give you that early morning rush to get up for in the first place.

Businesses suited themselves to their customers, and the high-pressure, fast-paced world of muggles did not exist for wizards (a big part of why they found muggleborns so annoying - "You want it this afternoon? What? Are you crazy? I've got a tea-time appointment with friends!").

If you wanted something non-standard, that didn't come off the shelves, and put it on rush order, you'd get it back in a week... maybe. Muggles would have a comparable service done for you in under an hour, tops.

But that well established trend suited Harry's purposes as well, as guards on the Ministry at this hour would be few, and most napping at their stations as there was nothing for them to do. Thus, security would be light, if not non-existent aside from wards. And Voldemort's memories would get him past virtually any ward in existence.

He could hardly have killed his chosen victims otherwise. The first reaction of any magical folks when in danger was to layer their homes in magical wards to keep out any invaders, much like this sanctuary intended to do.

And, well, if you hunted people who liked to play clam you had to be able to get through those shells. You didn't get to any of your prey otherwise.

Without that skill he'd have been known as "The Great Wannabe", as in "Yes, he'd wanted to kill a great many people, but he never managed it."

Harry broke into a house of someone he knew worked at the Ministry and used their floo to access the employee-only floo entrance to the Ministry building, bypassing most intruder wards and detections, just to save time.

Yes, he could've broken through the front entrance, but why bother? More especially, why bother when this other route was so much easier? The man hadn't even bothered to lock the front door!

He'd have to thank Arthur Weasley for that sometime. Yes, they had very nice wards over the house in times of danger, but during these peaceful years you could walk in and steal his children, if you wanted.

Not that Harry had any such inclination, nor did he think that would change.

Having effectively bypassed most of the protections over the Ministry itself it was time to go on to the Department of Mysteries.

Harry was lowering himself on a zip-line into a cell in moments.

"Hi! My name is Harry Potter, and I'm here to rescue you!"

The woman he saw was old, aged before her years by inhumane treatment and harsh abuse, worse even than his was. Simple wards over these cells to prevent use of wand magic made a fifty foot vertical shaft one of the most effective forms of confinement in existence. Just drop down the food and water, and lower a rope ladder when you wanted someone out. If they didn't climb up on their own, send someone down to fetch them - and make sure to add punishments for your inconvenience on top of what they were suffering.

The floor magically absorbed wastes, and that was that, nearly impenetrable cells by wizarding standards. Of course, muggles would teach themselves rock climbing by sheer trial and error, and be out of there in months, tops. But they probably had slickening charms on the walls to prevent that. Magic was their answer to everything, after all.

Therefore, the muggle rappelling gear. Dropping those rope ladders down would trigger alarms he didn't feel like dealing with. But, some conjured muggle currency and a bribe to a muggle to open his shop early, and he had some top of the line equipment for search and rescue belaying and rappelling.

The cynical, hardened old woman looked up at him with weary eyes. "Aren't you a little young to be rescuing damsels?"

He gave her an infectious grin. "You started in on the hero business younger than I did, Alice Lovegood. I only intentionally began saving people at eleven years old. Your granddaughter sends her regards. In fact I was going to ask your permission to marry her, but do you mind if we get out of here first?"

"Just get me to a chess set, or a mirror, and you'll have my blessing" the woman stated solemnly.

"Luckily I came prepared," Harry set out both objects.

Alice chose the mirror, stepping through like it was a portal and arriving on the other side as she'd always been pictured in those books, about seven years old, long golden hair, and an old-fashioned dress. The newly invigorated girl waved to him, then stepped off a side of the reflection into Wonderland.

No point in his running off and hiding her. She knew her own way.

Harry had read those books in a school library when he was a kid. He knew that Alice had passed tests in Wonderland to become a queen there, called Queen Alice by the native inhabitants. She would be fine there, and had more powers to draw on than he probably realized.

Harry began ascending his rope.

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Author's Notes:

Yes, in the book, 'Through the Looking Glass' sequel to the more famous 'Alice in Wonderland' Alice becomes a queen of Wonderland. And while you can bet the natives there will be right ticked off at her treatment by wizards out here, don't expect that to become the focus of this story.

And yes, I submitted you to more of the magical creature lore of Fablehaven. But I honestly prefer learning facts about how things work than exploring the depths of inner feelings of creatures like Snape, like Rowling would subject us to.

Shakespeare was famous for never having a villain (well, he did have ONE) without redeeming, human qualities. But he still never tried to tell us they were anything other than VILLAINS!

Think of it like a bank account. Every good deed deposits money, while every cruel one withdraws it. Whether you have a positive or negative balance is all about whether you made more deposits than withdrawals. And even a few very big deposits aren't going to counter a constant string of withdrawals taken out over a much longer period of time.

So if you count saving a life and destroying one as equal, not necessarily killing a person, just destroying their life, then grant Snape full credit for all those times Rowling said he did something good, he'd still be so far into the minus ranges that you couldn't find him without digging a pit, from all of those lives he's ruined, both as a TERRIBLE teacher, AND a Death Eater!

Cost for benefit, Snape is an extremely poor investment. And a villain.

Chapter Twenty-Two

by Lionheart

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Harry busied himself in the Department of Mysteries, hurrying about his tasks there in much the same way Hermione had in the Headmaster's office, and for most of those same reasons - he didn't want to be caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

He went to the room dealing with time and stole every Time Turner they had there, as well as all of the collected fairy wings and powder used to fashion special use ones, replacements, or to make repairs.

Dumbledore had his fingers in this place, and Harry didn't want to have to deal with a time-traveling Headmaster. One of them was bad enough. Come to think of it, if he was loaning any of these out to students, it was a certainty that Dumbledore had his own set. But that didn't matter. Denying an enemy any resource at all (even if it was only denying him the ability to expand his operations, perhaps handing out more of these to his followers) was always a good idea.

Harry was as yet unaware that Dumbledore's own personal time turner and his spare would be destroyed later that day by Hermione. But that just made it ever so clear and obvious why clearing out the Department of Mysteries' stock of those before had been a good idea.

Always deny your enemy resupply when you can, even if you don't know if or when you can knock out his actual supplies. Because sometimes you get lucky (or your enemy gets unlucky) and he gets trapped without and starts losing options. So it's just a good policy to have.

The wards in this place were bad enough it would take Harry days to disable them all, days he did not have. So he couldn't cause any sort of widescale disruption or damage, not without substantial prep time ahead of time, at any rate. So maybe if he was planning to stage an ambush down here he could do that, but for this operation that was strictly a no-no.

He wanted to be quick in and quick out, no loitering, and since he didn't want to be stuck extracting himself from an automatic lockdown, that meant no burning the place down behind him.

He could, however, rescue all of their prisoners, letting them go and pointing them to an international floo they could escape from. The Ministry was THE government building for magical England, and such a floo existed for political reasons, transporting ambassadors and such. They'd drop into hefty security on the other side, so the dangerous ones would get contained, while the rest would probably be used as political ammunition against the magical UK, as in, "Look at what nasty stuff you've been up to! Look! We have WITNESSES! Now, don't you want to grant us favors to stay quiet about it?"

Political nightmares for Dumbledore's power base were ALWAYS a good idea!

Even if all that cost him was political capital, that was still an excellent move in the right direction, as it gave him less weight to throw around later, on other issues that might be important to him. Things like, oh, say, extraditing Harry once he'd fled to another country.

The boy couldn't bring himself to believe that Dumbles wouldn't try to get him back by any and all means at his disposal, from declaring him a 'strategic national asset' to a wanted criminal, or both at once, who knew?

Staying in the lap of that beast was also tantamount to suicide, so he'd be forced to make an attempt to escape to another country sooner or later.

Naturally, he favored sooner.

Saving prisoners costs a lot of time, and this place was warded against the use of time turners, so it wouldn't be a good idea to have multiple copies of himself walking around down there, even if he'd left the place to create them. So Harry had to go before he could work any more devilry on that department than snagging a few large books and a certain prophecy.

He used a Ministry owl to send the thing to the Daily Prophet, and another of those Ministry owls to run an ad in that paper for Snape's Magical Pimping Service, with polyjuice prices and a complete listing of available hairs, just to see if that couldn't stir up some trouble for the Greasy Haired Git.

Odd, but in that moment when he'd only just sent that owl off to advertise Snape's wares, Harry felt like the true son of a Marauder for the first time in his very young life.

Because THAT was a prank! One worthy of his father and his friends.

Enough time had passed that offices and things were now opening. One of the last things Future-Hermione had told him before he'd left the sanctuary where the future selves were conversing, was that she'd dosed Dumbledore's tea with malaclaw venom, and he'd drunk it around three-thirty.

So, that was the time this Harry was going to make a push for various legal measures he'd already put into motion before, including his emancipation.

Dumbledore had used his various positions of authority to outright ban Harry from becoming an emancipated minor. The only way to overturn that was a full vote of the Wizengamot, so Harry had decided to call for one.

Still, he had five hours between ten (the time the Ministry really got moving) and three, when he'd start to try to call for a vote, counting on a half hour delay, at minimum, before thing got started moving. He went to the office which sent out meeting notices to Wizengamot members to send out that call, snagging the one for Dumbledore to hand-deliver himself, say about evening-ish, long after the actual vote had passed.

Then it was off to the bank.

Harry watched with a satisfied smile as all of the gold under his control was removed from Gringotts. The goblins in general and one goblin in particular had taken advantage of their ability to limit access

to gold during the war. Armies may march on their stomachs, Harry thought to himself, but wars were won and lost by gold. More gold meant more medicine, more food, more weapons. Less meant death. After all, winning a war takes almost everything you have, while losing takes it all.

This was but the opening salvo of a barrage, where Harry intended to move all of his family holdings out of country. There were even devices, expensive ones to be sure, but still devices that allowed one to move homes, farms and other landed property intact from place to place. He intended to use them.

After all, why go only to leave all of your belongings behind? That made you a refugee, and easy prey to powerful types like Dumbledore, the Ministry, or anyone else for that matter.

Harry spent some hours getting his network of safehouses established, just in case he was forced to return to this country, or had to run operations there. It was useful to leave some options open behind yourself, after all.

For the most part he used muggle means, along with loads of conjured cash, to buy warehouses or abandoned properties, then put them all under Fidelius.

For that matter, he went back to that safari shop and got himself a second complete set of gear, then another two sets for each girl, packed them all into their own magically expanded trunks, stuffed each with other useful supplies like well-preserved potion ingredients, then put each 'emergency trunk' in a locket on a necklace - one such necklace for himself and each girl.

Harry then put Fidelius on each one, and a wrist holster for a backup wand, also under Fidelius. Getting a used wand to serve as a backup was usually no problem. Obtaining a GOOD one, on the other hand, was more difficult and time consuming. Luckily, he already had Voldemort's wand, reclaimed from Pettigrew, to serve him in that capacity. And, while he was thinking of it, Harry used Voldemort's wand to remove all of the underage tracking charms, both Ministry and Dumbledore's, from his holly and phoenix feather wand. But

instead of outright canceling those detection and limitation spells on his original wand, he moved them to a muggle pencil he'd picked up somewhere.

Dumbledore wanted to know where he was and what he was doing at all times? Fine. He could track the pencil. Harry could leave it behind whenever he wanted to go do something sneaky, like now.

But, right at that very moment, Harry had a wizengamot vote to attend.

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The Office of the Headmaster burned.

Dumbledore staggered under the force of the loss. The portraits of previous headmasters! All of the wisdom and experience of the ages, Gone! No more would some of the most brilliant and able leaders of the past several hundred years be on call to aid him, advising on every issue! That was tragic in a way the deaths of every student under his care would NOT be!

The books were no loss. Every Christmas or birthday, every time someone gave him presents, they always seemed to think he needed books. The ones on display in his office were those books. It often served him several times to put them there, once when givers saw them on display presumably where he used them, and once when he lent them out, letting those who received them think they were getting some measure of trust with his treasures, when actually he most often had several copies, and those weren't his real treasured books in any case.

No, the library in his office had been all for show, regardless of the rarity or value of those tomes. He had much better secreted away in a private library no one ever saw. The loss of the displayed tomes was no great loss at all.

The knowledge of those previous headmasters and headmistresses, however, was keenly felt, and irreplaceable! Often their wisdom had never been truly captured in any tome! And it would not be the same in any case, if it were!

No, his cabinet, his circle of advisors, and truly the only ones to whom he had any degree of trust anymore (due mostly to their oaths to faithfully serve the interests of the school's headmaster - meaning himself) were GONE!

Snape could've been fed his own horcrux and thrust into the fiery heart of a volcanic mountain, or McGonagall sacrificed by Aztec tribesmen on the head table of the Great Hall at lunchtime before the entire school full of witnesses and not cost him as great a grief! Not nearly so!

In fact, if it would've regained him even so much as one such portrait, Albus would've gladly arranged both 'accidents' himself!

The Sorting Hat was no loss. Spells to do the actual Sorting were quite simple and he could easily create a counterfeit. No one would notice. The priceless artifact had been endowed with other powers, it was true, and had been a wonderful resource in its time, instructing him about control of the wards and powers that were his as Headmaster, before it clammed up on him.

He could program a simplified replacement with songs the original used over the last hundred years, and no one but him would know it was recycling them, as no one else had been at school that long.

He could grant this suitable replacement hat a personality more amenable to his whims, and willing to share with him all the data it discovered while sitting on students heads - something the original had long refused to do. So that, at least, would be a significant improvement. But a resource nowhere near as valuable as other great minds he used to bounce ideas off of!

Countless Slytherins had helped refine his plans. Ravenclaws offered their wisdom and intelligence. Gryffindors had been Devil's advocates to tell him how they might have opposed his whims, and thus anticipate any resistance before it happened, while Hufflepuffs had told him how to coach his plans in terms to seem more friendly and make others like them.

No, there was no substitute for those great minds aiding him willingly, unable to act against him due to their oaths. There simply was nothing to replace it!

Every Hufflepuff or Gryffindor headmaster or headmistress had been his drama coach, teaching him how to act so contrary to his natural inclinations as to be taken for a kindly grandfather and leader of Light. The potions only did so much, and primarily that was to blunt the negative aspects of his own character. His own natural urges went so counter to their advice that he'd needed constant support, and without those portraits teaching him how to constantly refine his act and correct for errors as they crept in he could lose his edge, and no longer be so convincing!

Such coaching required an intimate familiarity in detail as to the problem (his own evil), as well as a complete opposite personality of the one helping him to conceal it, which was something he was not going to find elsewhere. The former headmasters and headmistress of Hogwarts had been almost uniquely situated to provide him both. While he had nominal control of the rest of the paintings of the castle, it did not run as deep.

He simply could not trust any other paintings enough to hang in his office, learning his every secret, and granting him that sort of advice!

Dumbledore had not always been as much of a monster as he was today. In his youth he had not been able to afford it, not yet being above suspicion and holding so much authority as to be effectively above the law. However, in the intervening years he'd allowed himself to yield to his own desires so greatly that he could not so much as recall the methods he had used in his youth, nor the limits he had once held himself to, being forced to conceal his own lust for power behind his publicly displayed merits.

However, for so long he'd been able to rely on the excellent advice of former headmasters that he had grown dependent on it. It was his crutch, and now moving along without it seemed an unconquerable obstacle. He knew he could and would recover, but it would take him precious time and labor, effort he'd much rather spend collecting information and controlling the world would now have to be redirected

into rediscovering his old habits to shield his behavior on his own, without that excellent coaching and advice.

While sorrowing over this loss, grieving for the advantage it cost him, Albus moved on to the subject of Trelawney - the true object of this raid.

Lifting a well-charmed pair of thoroughly tracked glasses from a fresh pile of small, burned bones, the Headmaster had time to grieve on this loss. By his estimation, the Fingerlickers had broken into his office, killed Trelawney and transfigured her body into that of a small chicken as an insult to him.

Dumbledore was unaware of just how bad his luck was, that his House Elves had elected to serve him a whole roast chicken that night, or that they had unaccountably delivered it early... right about the time Hermione was leaving his office, in point of fact, and by strange, unlucky coincidence the meal had landed under the pile of Trelawney's clothes as the escaping Miss Granger'd tossed them and her glasses aside to evade the tracking charms on them.

Such a coincidence required spectacularly bad luck, but the Headmaster was not as yet aware of that problem and too wrapped up in the difficulties this created to consider it.

Truly, his seer was irreplaceable.

There were very few gifted oracles in the world, and while they could not tell their own futures, they had remarkable insight into the status of the others of their rather limited sorority. For years they had been hatching schemes to get Trelawney from him. In fact, it was a regular part of their interviews together for him to question Trelawney about how to foil her sister oracles in their plots to save her from him. He'd found endless amusement in that, using Trelawney's powers against herself to keep her servile to him.

But regardless, now she was lost, and every other notable figure in the world of Divination would be avoiding him like a plague of festering boils - and there were many that would actually prefer the boils.

So, no. They were on guard against him, HAD been on guard against him, and would remain so. While he had been successful in limiting their influence and tarnishing the name of Divination until no one of any authority listened to those old crones, Dumbledore would not have an oracle to call his own again.

They all hated him too badly for that to happen.

Attempting to control the damage, Dumbledore stumbled out of doors until he came around to Hagrid's cabin, which struck him as an odd place to hide his stolen devices (which had multiple security charms on them to prevent theft, including anti-shrinking and anti-tranfiguration charms to prevent an easy, light fingered escape) until he came around back and saw the niffler cage, a pen full of beasts who, even then, were fighting over the tattered, broken scraps of the last of his sensitive devices.

Albus was struck poignantly by this final touch, equal parts tragic and trivial. He'd relied on those silver devices to monitor everything that needed keeping track of outside of Hogwarts halls that was not worthy of Trelawney's predictions. They were his buffer against all sorts of unpredictable goings on. An oracle cannot monitor everything, and there were notable figures in politics that no longer had school-age children, so were far less likely to be openly discussed within his well-spied halls.

His silver instruments had filled the gap between what he learned from Hogwarts and what was worthy of spending an oracle's powers on.

Some, such as the monitoring charms on Harry, would be trivial to replace, as the boy was even now attending Hogwarts. Creating new magical linkages to other figures of importance, however, would range from only moderately difficult to downright impossible, as he had to have a moment's unrestricted access to the person to be monitored to collect blood samples and cast the needed spells. That was hardly something one could do to a sitting Minister of Magic. Oh, well, in Fudge's case he could, as the nitwit would never suspect anything after a memory modification or Obliviate. The blowhard

never had before. The Head of Magical Law Enforcement, on the other hand, as well as several aurors... they fell in the more difficult range.

Voldemort, however, was currently impossible to place new tracking charms on. That, as well as his present inability to track the Flamels to see if they really died (they hadn't yet, and he strongly suspected they were racing to make another stone to replace the one he'd stolen from them, then claimed to have destroyed), were more worrisome. Having key figures like that out of his benign, all-seeing view could lead to all sorts of complications.

Nevertheless, even for the easy monitors, getting new silver instruments constructed, then tying them to appropriate targets, would take months. MONTHS! All that while precious information would be lost!

Others? He'd been decades visiting notable figures around the world, and in some cases never had found opportunities to place them under monitoring in this way. Now that the bulk of his instruments had been destroyed, taking their vital linkages with them, he'd been set back almost a hundred years.

Still, he was a far more notable figure himself than he had been back then. He could, and would, get an agent to introduce some controversial bit of legislation, then use his position as Head of the International Confederation of Wizards to go around politicking, meeting privately with other notable figures in order to 'influence their votes', and use that opportunity to trap them once again under his watchful eye.

He'd had to do the same thing on a regular basis to catch new figures into his fold as they entered the realm of politics, after all.

Still, holes had been torn in his net and that irked him something dreadful, as even if most of them could be fixed, some couldn't. And while he was making repairs he was learning less than he really wanted to.

Perhaps the scariest thing of all about the dreadful losses the Headmaster had been taking of late, was that he could absorb them all without the least twinge of control lost among the magical world. He'd had his fingers so deep in so many pies that not even these catastrophes could budge him. All that would be required was a little time and he'd be as on top of his game as before, save only for the loss of Trelawney.

Everything else would soon be replaced with equal or even better sources.

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A dozen man-sized playing cards with human arms and legs and faces leapt up off the ground they had perfectly molded themselves against to hold very real and deadly looking spears facing in toward their prisoner.

"Hello, Mister Black," Luna said, smiling softly with her back to him.

"Something about this feels so wrong," Sirius Black answered, speaking out from the bars of a cage on which hung a 'distinctly not a trap' sign. But the smell of fried chicken had drawn his dog form all the way from Hogsmead.

Luna had carried an extra bucket with her that morning, and played solitaire until she won a game, then bet a galleon on a coin toss to make certain the bad luck had gone before putting her plans into motion.

But an abandoned picnic lunch on a table all spread out, inside a disillusioned cage charmed so no matter which way you approached, the entrance would always face you...

... and one starving fugitive in the area who had been living on rats.

The 'distinctly not a trap' sign on the cage as it got revealed was going a bit too far, though. That was pranking below the belt, that was!

Luna spun around, seated in a muggle leather office chair that had been just as invisible as she'd been up until a moment ago, idly petting Harry's pet kneazel Gus, whom she had charmed white for this occasion. "So, Mister Black..."

Sirius felt his eyes focus on the kneazel, knowing about those cat's uncanny dislike of unsavory people. That it was sitting in her lap allowing itself to be petted spoke volumes about his captor. Of course, there was also the rather disturbing fact that cat was GRINNING at him!

Cat faces couldn't make that expression, could they?

One of the playing-card men poked his wicked sharp spear a bit too close and the fugitive raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Uh, I can explain..."

Luna rose from her seat, and still holding and petting the cat, approached him. "At last you come before us, Your Blackness. I knew the temptation charm on the fried chicken would draw a starving fugitive..."

"Really, I'm innocent! I was framed!"

Luna pouted. "Oh, pooh! You keep interrupting my Evil Monologue (TM). How am I supposed to get through this if you keep causing me to forget my lines? Now where was I?"

The little blonde pulled a sheaf of papers out of her pocket and began to consult them.

"You'd scripted this out?" Sirius asked, amazed and, in spite of himself, a little impressed - both that she'd been that confident of catching him and... well, it brought back old memories. This was something like the Marauders would do, back in the old days.

"Uh huh," Luna bobbed her head cutely, now juggling papers so she did not drop Harry's cat.

In one smooth motion she'd produced Colin's camera and snapped a photo of Sirius hanging on the inside of his cage bars right underneath the 'distinctly not a trap' sign.

Sirius' face had paled. "That is so like something James would do," he whispered, as if to himself. "Even down to recording evidence of his triumph. He'd kept a journal of that stuff, and I've never found it."

"Probably in his family vaults," Luna demurely agreed. Her parents had been to school during the Marauding Era too, after all.

"No, I looked there, polyjuiced as James. He never could keep a password secret from me," Sirius kept mumbling. "And I knew where to find his key."

"You also knew where to find Amelia Bones' knickers, but that doesn't mean you ever got them," Luna supplied helpfully.

"Oh, no, I did! That was in our first year," Sirius reminisced. "Lucius bet me that I couldn't, so I did. I told him a brave tale about secret passageways that bypassed the girls' stairs, but actually I knew where elves did laundry and got them from there."

"So there aren't secret passages to bypass the girls dorm alarms?" Luna blinked, sounding disappointed. Waving her hand, she signaled the playing-card men to stop poking him and ship their spears to port arms.

"Oh, of course there are! We found those in third year, but by then no one would bet me that I couldn't nab a pair of any girl's panties." Sirius quickly corrected. "Kind of took the fun out of it, really."

"Ah, but there is a perfect defense - don't own any," Luna nodded sagely.

"Nope," Sirius disagreed, shaking his head. "Some girls tried that. You only have to give her a package as a present, then steal them back again after she wears them or throws them away. That still qualifies. They were hers, however briefly. Lily got SOO enraged with

James after he found that loophole." The man smiled fondly in remembrance.

The cat, Sirius noticed, had disappeared - all except for its grin, which hung suspended above the blonde girl's shoulder. A Cheshire Kneazel? No, that was impossible. Every wizard knew that Cheshire Cats didn't exist. But... then why was that disturbing grin hanging there?

"Speaking of boys and their stealing knickers from women who turn into the mothers for their children, I need you to formally engage me to Harry," Luna changed the subject.

"Ah," Sirius smacked his lips delicately. "Has he stolen any of your knickers yet?"

"Well, no..."

"Have you stolen his?"

"Not at present. But I'm willing to give it a try."

"I don't know," Sirius temporized, slowly shaking his head. "We have something of a family tradition at stake here. Granted, it's only been going on a single generation, but you've always got to start these things somewhere."

Luna blinked. "Aren't you oddly sane and rational, not to mention having a strong sense of humor, for someone just escaped from Azkaban?"

"Your joke got me back into my happy place, work with me here," the man waved a hand airily, dismissing her concerns. "Living in the past agrees with me, provided I can pretend the last dozen years didn't happen."

"Shouldn't be too hard," Luna quirked her lips. "Snape is also pretending they didn't happen, and that he is still a student at school standing up to bullies - ignoring the fact that he is now an authority figure being the bully."

"Oh, he always was," Sirius quipped. "A bully. He just wasn't a very good one. He'd start something, then we'd finish it, time after time, until it got to be a habit. He kept trying to rule the school and bully the new students, and we'd prove to them all what an ass he was. He never was able to stand us for that reason alone, and spent most of his school time plotting to get us expelled."

"He truly is living in the past." Luna blinked, astonished. "What you described is exactly the way he treats Harry."

"Which brings us back to Harry and your knickers," Sirius sat down at the table inside the cage and began filling up a plate of fried chicken. "Why would I want to engage a perfectly good godson to someone like you, when I've hardly known you for five minutes?"

"Because it would be funny?" Luna ventured.

Sirius stopped moving. "Dang, but that's a hard argument to resist."

"You could try?"

"No, no. I couldn't." Sirius was shaking his head. "It's just too much. Here I am, weakened for want of food, talking about knickers, and the temptation to engage my godson is simply too much for me. You'll just have to accept that you'll be living with a starving fugitive in your basement who wants to attend all your meals... and heckle all of your romantic moments."

"That sounds like a match made in Heaven!" Luna beamed. To the odd look she got from the scraggly man, she replied, "Oh, but as a wedding present to dear Harry, I'm afraid that I'd have to give you to the Head of Magical Law Enforcement as a prank. Perhaps I could arrange to do it on a blind date?"

Sirius' jaw dropped, he was so impressed. Swallowing his mouthful of chicken, he said, "You put me on a date with the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, and get me out WITHOUT getting caught, and that'd be a prank worthy of the bride of a future Marauder!"

Reaching in past the playing-card men guards to stick her arm in through the bars, Luna swept off the invisibility cloak hiding Amelia Bones, who'd been bound and sitting at the same table, and in the same cage as Sirius.

"She sleeps rather soundly, and I got up early this morning," Luna supplied helpfully. "Of course, I was rather counting on her being unlucky enough to have a career shattering moment, sharing a picnic lunch date with Magical Britain's Most Wanted Criminal, to help pull this trap off. That way she'd be trapped in the awkward situation of either investigating the evidence that finds you innocent, or losing her job."

Sirius looked at her in awe. "Kid, when I sign those engagement papers, can we get her to be the witness? Please?"

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Author's Notes:

No, Luna didn't kidnap Amelia herself. She was too unlucky for that. No, she had Harry use Bella to do that, and Bellatrix is EXACTLY the sort of person who can break into the home of the Head of Magical Law Enforcement during the wee hours and kidnap her.

Getting her not to kill/hurt/harm/maim her is a little more difficult, but can be done with sufficient instructions; something along the lines of "I need her alive and unspoiled" though not those words exactly.

Getting her not to let her victim know who her kidnapper really was adds another wrinkle, but is still within Bella's abilities. That chick is one seriously skilled and dangerous Death Eater! "You want this Ministry Lady to disappear from her house and wake up in another place without any idea how that happened? Fine. I can do that in ways that don't even require an Obliviate."

Oh, and getting Amelia to be unlucky enough to attract Sirius and be forced into a date with him is as simple as causing her to wear that cloak dipped in malaclaw venom.

Chapter Twenty-Three
by Lionheart

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Harry was white in the face.

Failed. How could he have FAILED?!

The Wizengamot vote ought to have been a mere formality, a token 'uh-huh' to let him take the position that was rightfully his. In spite of all of his many titles, Dumbledore had no real excuse for denying Harry emancipation, none that were at all legally supportable anyway. Harry had every reason and then some for emancipation, all of the qualifications they asked for and more. His was better than a textbook case of 'this is when emancipation is needed.'

Yet the Geezergamot had voted to support Dumbledore anyway.

The ramifications of that were downright scary, as with malaclaw venom in his veins Dumbledore ought to be living the very personification of Murphy's Law: If anything can go wrong, it will.

That NOTHING went wrong for in him in that vote... meant that it couldn't.

To have failed to overturn Dumbledore's ruling in an open vote with him as unlucky as he was... what that said was that there was no possible way for Albus to have lost that vote. Anything at all chancy would be going against him now. The least probability of anything going wrong ought to be realized. What that said, for his luck to be that bad yet for him to STILL succeed...

It said that there was no way Dumbledore was losing in any political contest. There was no crack, no chink in the armor for his bad luck to exploit. The Headmaster's victory had been certain, no matter what Harry did, and in spite of all that had happened.

That brought back memories of Voldemort, acting through Lucius, and his earlier statement that Dumbledore never lost a contest in the

Ministry that he did not intend to lose. And those he intentionally lost he'd always twist around to increase his power. Even NOT being the Minister of Magic fit into those plans, as that way there was always someone in authority to blame who wasn't Dumbledore, and thus someone for Albus to use as a scapegoat.

That was sobering.

It was also pathetic, in a way. Realtime, the Dursleys had just been exposed as these terrible abusive people, the most horrid guardians imaginable, and public sentiment on that was still cresting, almost but not quite yet at its peak. There was this terrible backlash of 'save our boy hero' going on. The Ministry itself, through its dementors, had been responsible for nearly killing him. An entire administration had fled the country over fear of angry mobs in the backlash over that.

Harry was never going to have more public support behind him than now, nor any more clear and obvious NEED for emancipation! The Dark Ravenclaw was as unlucky as he was ever going to get, so this contest was Harry striking with his sharpest tool at his enemy's weakest point.

Yet still the Headmaster won anyway.

That settled it. Harry just was not going to win any contest in politics when Dumbledore opposed him. That made it meaningless to try, as if he couldn't win THIS time, when Harry had everything in his favor and his foe was off balance, overworked, unlucky, and fighting against a tremendous tide of public sentiment, then no advantage was going to be enough.

If you couldn't win on those terms there was no point even to try.

The Dark Lord Voldemort really might regain a body faster than Harry could free himself from the supposed 'Light' side effectively imprisoning him. And though different, those circumstances were surprisingly equal in most ways. Voldemort could not do most things in his present state, and his minders wouldn't let Harry do anything if they could avoid it.

So both Harry and Voldemort stole what opportunities they could on the sly.

Harry had, he had to admit, grown used to a series of successes from his recent series of stabs at the Headmaster's authority and establishing a life and future for himself.

This came as a bitter reminder that he was still very much a junior player.

Harry felt so very, very much behind. He still had quite a lot of catching up to do before he could hope to match the least of his opponents in battle.

Voldemort had a large number of followers willing to die for him, people who had influence, wealth and power and were willing to use that on his behalf, while Harry had only a couple of friends his own age and one of Voldemort's followers duped to serve him instead (a fundamentally unsound relationship).

On that point, things could hardly be more unequal.

For that matter, with the magical government wholly in Dumbledore's pocket Harry was clearly in last place as far as followers or political influence were concerned. Most of the people who highly regarded 'The-Boy-Who-Lived' had loyalties first and foremost to Albus Dumbledore.

And, as the Geezergamot vote just proved, if people were forced to choose between supporting The-Boy-Who-Lived versus backing the Headmaster, they backed Dumbledore every time.

That left Harry distinctly lacking in the follower department, and in this war most of the work was done by proxies acting on orders.

Another area in which he lacked was personal power. Tom had tons of skills and devices that Harry would not, could not bring himself, to use. Getting an equal arsenal of spells and tools of a usable sort was an enormous task, and Voldemort was the junior and less educated of the two dark lords who had singled Harry out for destruction.

As far as power-enhancing rituals performed, Harry was also last place, as he only knew of the fire immunity one out of Voldemort's memories, so he knew Tom had performed that one before. Whereas Dumbledore, if he'd used the Goblet to bind Fawkes to serve him as the Fairy Queen had said, then he must have known about that fire immunity ritual also.

The Queen said the Goblet of Fire could bind a phoenix to someone's service only at maximum power. Going by what Harry knew, you couldn't even USE the cup at its maximum potential without having performed the fire immunity ritual on yourself. There was no way to handle the cup when it was that fully charged without burning to death otherwise. Spells would slide off and it would melt any tools.

That was Harry's one major power enhancement ritual so far, and both of his rivals had already performed it - and done it successfully, too.

Harry had nearly killed himself, and his friends, when he'd tried it. Of course, that had its advantages, too. Being remade by the Fairy Queen had put him back into play with some unique advantages. The trouble with that was, Harry himself didn't really know what those were, aside from an absolute defense against mind probes (something he could already defend himself rather well against), and becoming a metamorph.

The only really telling advantage so far out of all that had been some advice the Fairy Queen had given them - targeting information on where to hit the Dark Ravenclaw where it would truly hurt him.

They'd struck one such blow already. Harry resolved that when they all spun back to have that discussion in the clearing around the shrine, that he bring up as their next possible mission doing that ritual with the Goblet of Fire that would free Fawkes from service to the Headmaster. That was another one of those blows the Fairy Queen had said Dumbledore could not recover from.

Taking Hogwarts itself from Albus seemed more than a little bit out of their league for now, so he'd have to be content with removing two of

the three unique and irreplaceable treasures that gave Dumbledore added powers. It would have to be enough, because they couldn't do any more than that.

No, getting beaten at the Ministry that badly had shaken Harry's confidence and made him even wonder why he was in the game at all. Oh, that was right, he didn't have a choice in the matter. He could either roll over and die or stand up to fight, and even a losing battle had some chance for success, whereas surrender held none.

Depressing really, but the only way to oppose the Headmaster seemed to be the route Voldemort took - become an outlaw. There was nothing else to do when the law was unbending in support of a man that wanted you dead.

But Harry didn't want to tread that outlaw road, and hoped moving to another country was a better option. Plus, he still had one advantage in the three way war - the other two may have targeted him, but they both currently thought that he was a piece on the gameboard, not another player.

For however long that lasted, he had an advantage.

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Bellatrix could not have been happier.

Her assignment to watch over the maturing vessel of her soon to be reborn Dark Lord had started out well, and smoothly. That was to be celebrated. It hopefully boded well for the whole assignment, though it was too early to tell.

Then she'd been woken that morning by the vessel of her Lord. If she'd had any doubts that he was her master (which she didn't) they would have ended on receiving that assignment: to enter the home of Amelia Bones, the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, and take her alive and unharmed to where she could be properly molded and conditioned into her master's service.

That mission, too, had gone flawlessly. Sometimes the life of a Death Eater didn't get any better than this!

On that, she shortly found herself mistaken, as life soon got better yet when Headmaster Dumbledore approached her in her Filch disguise, himself in a drunken delirium, anguished over the loss of some property in his tower.

It was not in the Headmaster's normal routine to drink to excess, but today he'd had the bad luck or bad judgment to get himself plastered, and Bellatrix fought to keep a smirk off of the face she was wearing. As the man began to rant to the 'sympathetic ear' of his 'old friend' she learned someone had set fire to his office and he'd lost something precious to him in the blaze.

In the short and somewhat slurred conversation Bella made sure to keep her face averted, pretending to busy herself with a broom, while Dumbledore sought to cry on the shoulder of his old friend Filch.

She learned quite a few things doing so.

If Dumbledore had one weakness it was that he was certain of his own superiority. But there is a problem with pompous pride. It always leaves you blind and vulnerable to your attackers.

Somehow, she missed the irony of that observation.

Then her blood chilled within her as, in drunken ramblings, the Headmaster asked her opinions on his problem: How to kill her master!

Already Harry Potter and Voldemort were nearly synonymous in her mind. She felt convinced one was taking over the other, and she was right, just not in the way she'd supposed.

She nearly hexed the drunken fool right there, but allowed him to mumble on, knowing that he might well have servants who'd carry this on in his stead and to know his plans would better enable her to thwart them.

The inebriated loon told her, in many stumbling phrases, that he didn't want to be the one to do the deed directly, although he mumbled too badly for her to understand why. But, although lacking details, the old fool did bring up what he wanted to accomplish in this plan.

In the first place, he wanted to destroy Hermione Granger so he could keep Harry isolated, weak and ineffectual. Seeing as how her master had already proposed converting the girl to his side, Bellatrix felt any plan to destroy her was something that had to be averted. Her Lord had use for the young witch, therefore he would have her, and no doddering old fool would call that fact into question!

But that was the baseline of Dumbledore's plan. First, the Granger girl must be destroyed. Everything else was gravy. While he would try to destroy Harry at the same time, he would accept it as a success if only the girl died.

That caused Bellatrix to become doubly protective of the girl. Anything the Headmaster wanted so desperately, it was a good idea to deny him.

After some further drunken mumblings, which Bellatrix was not quite sure, but sounded oddly like 'ungrateful son' and 'unite the schools', Dumbledore ranted for a while on how unfair Snape was being to deny him sex before he got back on topic. The key points seemed to be a detention, the acromantula menace out in the forest, a glass tower, and a possibility of a creature 'following them back' from a detention in the forbidden forest - and how, if he got lucky, the spiders might destroy them without his help, as the students in question were out there playing in the forest already.

Unfortunately, in his drunken ramblings mention of a glass tower got him to start a rant on the greenhouses of Hogwarts and how unfair Sprout was being in not letting him grow some decent weed out there.

In a moment of lucidity, seeming to realize that he'd already said too much, Dumbledore surged to his feet and blasted the false Filch with an Obliviate before falling down on her pile of cleaning supplies and starting to snore.

Unluckily for Dumbledore, a proper Obliviate requires a great deal of mental focus, something he didn't have when he was falling down drunk. Normally that wouldn't make the slightest difference on Filch, but it was enough to cancel out the advantage the Elder Wand gave him, and the spell skittered harmlessly off Bellatrix LeStrange's Occlumency shields.

She left immediately to go warn Harry, purpose shining in her eyes.

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Though no one there had any immediate way of knowing it, that vote in the Wizengamot that day was the most costly victory Albus had ever won.

There was a reason that he chose to lose fights there periodically, and that was to conceal the full extent of his political power base and influence. The old man had agreements with practically every faction, secret treaties and so on such that unless an equally powerful interest was pushing from the other side (and there were none, Voldemort had only ever come close) then his victory was assured on every issue.

Dumbledore had different lies for different ears. To some, among the darker camp particularly, he was the grudging apologist who gave in on some points to preserve other issues. To others, he was the embattled champion bravely standing up to fight for their rights against impossible odds, to others he was the secret confidant and friend, and to still more he was the sole voice of reason.

They were all wrong, but they all served his purposes so long as they labored under those illusions.

Really, Albus had learned long ago that to control every move of a chess game you had to play both sides. He was both white and black in wizarding politics, acting through agents most of the time, as he so often did, but all agents were working toward his interests all the same.

Most of those who'd backed him as their 'champion against oppression' could only be disgusted by him if ever they realized he was the one orchestrating the oppression, as well.

It suited his purposes to create a magical underclass. Members of any sort of underclass were dissatisfied, and dissatisfied people were needy, reaching out for answers and eager for champions. By promising to give them those answers and be their champion, he gained their unswerving loyalty.

Really, it was the same pattern he'd pulled with Harry so successfully for so long, to create an intolerable situation (in Harry's case, the Dursleys) then appear as the savior and resolution to that problem, the rescuer.

The Hero.

Dumbledore had several sources to his power in the wizarding world. One was his carefully cultivated reputation, of course. People believed in heroes. They even needed them, and they were certainly all too willing to follow them. The perfect image the Headmaster cultivated allowed him to take advantage of that fact. But it was more than just his perceived heroism, he was also taken as being enormously wise - indeed, almost prescient.

Being virtually all-knowing had contributed more than anything to the high-worshipful regard people held him in.

But he was no hermit living on an obscure mountaintop either, Dumbledore did not flaunt it, but it was whispered in certain circles, rumors of the man's absolutely fantastic wealth - he could create a family fortune in a single gift. Indeed, it was said that he'd created the Malfoy's that way, nor were they alone in being recipients of his largess.

Always have something for anyone to admire, was one of his mottoes. Many revered bravery, some regarded wisdom, but most admired wealth. He aimed to have a quality that appealed to each one, and for the most part he'd succeeded.

But for his games in politics he carefully orchestrated moves to appear bewildering to some, yet let false patterns appear to others, keeping them from suspecting the real puppet master behind the scenes. And, if he won too many battles, that secret could be compromised.

At that vote turning down Harry's emancipation, Dumbledore had not been present to direct his usual brilliant facade of dozens of plots and sub plots concealing the real motives underneath. The arguments and counterpoints had been conspicuously absent. No one had had their script to play. Typical switching of sides and changing allegiances of power plays between factions had all been absent.

The cost for that was that in one unvarnished moment everyone saw that they all stood up, united and almost unanimous, to support Dumbledore in what they all knew to be a blatantly illegal act.

The usual stage magic had been missing, the brilliant genius of orchestration gone. The topic and vote had appeared so close together, and Dumbledore so busy with other issues, that no scripts had been handed out beforehand. No one had known what their roles were, so they had gone with simple loyalty to previous allegiances, as all had been rewarded for supporting him before.

In other words, without him telling them to vote against him, indirectly of course, they'd all voted to support him, and in that instant seen that they were not, as they'd always been told, the precious few whom he'd relied on to provide the key difference in a close vote against hostile party influence.

No, they'd seen instead that Dumbledore owned far more support than any member of that body had ever suspected before. For one, precious moment none of the smoke and mirrors had been functioning and everyone saw a brief glimpse of things as they really were.

Nothing could have been more scary.

Harry was not the only one to realize, 'Hey, wait a minute. This should have been a sure thing the OTHER way! Yet it wasn't.

Dumbledore has got a lot of power - much more than we'd realized.' What's worse, they not only realized it, they also realized that others there were seeing it for the first time. That was not a secret, it was open knowledge.

Worse still, people began to talk to one another, to carefully and coached in hedged terms and phrases, feel out one another's relationships to the Grand Sorcerer, and they began to discover that people they'd always thought of as political enemies also thought they were close friends of the Headmaster. And many of them also felt they'd been supporting him. In spite of their votes cast having nothing in common, people began to share, in difficult and often suspicious conversations, that they'd cast those contrary votes on the Supreme Mugwump's suggestions.

It was still very superficial and suspicious at first, but people had begun to realize that something stunk; that more was going on than appeared. Most of those that had been keenly focused on 'defeating the OTHER side' began to wake up and realize they'd all been played as puppets all along.

That realization would be a long time in coming for most, unfortunately; and the Master Manipulator still had enough skill in his game to come rushing in and soothe ruffled feathers, easing such suspicions and gently put them all back to sleep before they did anything concerning those realizations so he could regain his control, distracting them with pretty baubles or petty rivals once more so they could all be lulled into ignoring the real issues of just who he was and what he was up to again.

He was not in control of the magical world for nothing.

To be sure, this hurt him, but it was not anything close to a mortal blow. No one blow, or even a small series of them, was going to do anything to shake his mastery of servants he had been playing as fools for so very long.

Still, he did get VERY unlucky about one thing. Several of those unknowing servants had been holding on to tiny pieces out of a very large pie, but had the ill luck to get together and share what they'd felt

were inconsequential secrets that added up to a very frightening picture.

This was a common tool for Albus Dumbledore. He liked to splash in the pool to create waves that he could then bravely stand up against, sometimes failing, others succeeding. But it never did to have people know that he was the one making those waves in the first place - they had to appear to come out of nowhere, or as part of some enemy action.

No, it would never do to let anyone know he spent most of his time in the courts and public scene resisting his own oppression.

In this particular case the plot had centered around the Dursleys. They had been a priceless resource in controlling Harry for so long, and Dumbledore was not quite done with them. They had been exposed as the most brutal sort of unfeeling monsters the wizarding world had seen in some time, and the scandal of their actions had inspired more rage against muggles than had been seen by decent, upstanding folk in the longest time. Many upstanding magical citizens had feelings that would not have been out of place in Death Eaters during Voldemort's first rise.

No, that sort of feeling lay too close to his own interests for Dumbledore to just throw it aside. He had to make use of it while it lasted, and better still if he could have his cake and eat it too - use the Dursleys to control Harry still, despite those revelations, yet also expose them yet again to create more of that wonderful anti-muggle sentiment that proved so useful.

With even a bit more anti-muggle sentiment he could secretly push forward his agenda by decades, at the very least! Bills so unfair and bigoted no one would tolerate under normal circumstances could be presented by the very people who had opposed them before!

Albus had always believed wizards were destined to control muggles. With a few more bills in place, carried forward on this happy burst of anti-muggle sentiment, that agenda could be shoved forward by an entire generation's worth of work! More anti-muggleborn sentiment could be raised in the shadow of those Dursleys. More restrictive

legislation proposed and voted into place, creating more oppression and a stronger underclass that he could then turn around and champion to increase his power and control!

There was no way he could possibly lose, riding such a platform!

However, unluckily for him, several of those people, shocked in the wake of so complete and total a victory for him over such a blatantly illegal and open misuse of power, got together and, in the midst of feeling each other out to discern their real loyalties to Dumbledore, compared what they thought were inconsequential actions that added up to one of those waves Albus got so much political clout out of resisting.

The exposure of the Dursleys anti-magic bigotry and abuse of the Boy-Who-Lived had created a huge public outcry. However, instead of having mobs appear outside their house in Surrey, stern-faced Aurors had taken them into custody to await trial for those crimes.

What followed was not unlike one of those French mystery/comedies with people running in and out of doors in a bewildering array of brothers in law, guests, cousins, cheating wives, sisters and maternal aunts that lead up to a body and two hours of investigating who did what with whom and why is there a dead man in the middle of it all.

But what it all amounted to was the Dursley family getting transferred out of one office to another, to a different kind of custody, to something akin to a witness protection program, then into a convict laborer system that put them to work productively (or so the logic went), with a different drama appearing at the other end of the Ministry where the Boy-Who-Lived had his future getting determined by a bunch of people who'd never met him, then handed off to a committee of people who felt they had his best interests at heart, and would wind up pawning him off to a brand new program that just happened to be run by the Dursleys.

Yes, that's right. Two apparently unrelated schemes that wound up with things exactly as they started, the Dursleys having escaped all blame in a court mess that no one could ever truly untangle, once again guardians of the Savior of the Wizarding World, and trying to

beat the magic out of him so Dumbledore could cash in points as his rescuer again next school year.

It was, sadly, a scheme all too typical of Dumbledore when he was at his best.

Worse still, in ordinary cases he would've gotten considerable political pull by standing up to lead the outcry against this travesty of justice. Unfortunately for him, all of the people with whom he'd arranged to create all the little pieces of that puzzle got together and compared them, creating a road map that led right to his being the culprit behind this crime.

No one who'd put this puzzle together could believe it. Each felt sure of their own little piece, and couldn't help but suspect all the other parties involved as trying to blame Dumbledore for something none of them could believe him responsible for. Each also suspected the others of lying when they confessed to believing the same great man to be their patron, when they'd all disagreed on what that support was supposed to mean and what his aims were.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, Rita Skeeter had gotten wind of the bizarre vote earlier that day and had been hanging around in bug form as they all compared notes afterward. By a particular stroke of bad luck, she'd overheard as they'd put that puzzle together, and went buzzing off to publish her latest scoop even as the parties involved turned on each other as obvious liars trying to implicate Dumbledore in some wrongdoing each felt sure he couldn't be capable of.

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Author's Notes:

Many fics CLAIM to have Dumbledore as a Master Manipulator, but how many come as close as this, huh?

I mean, really!

If you want someone to be a secret political mastermind orchestrating oodles of evil, then by all means don't hold back!

Strangely, Dumbledore the super villain was NOT what I'd originally set out to do with this fic. I had other plans in mind, but I needed an opposing force and Old Voldy-Burger and his merry band of fries just weren't going to cut it, with the memories Harry gained through his scar. Still, Rowling has given us PLENTY of canon ammunition - pun intended, to use against Dumbles. And the facts remain that he is in charge of virtually everything, and everything sucks. So either he is incompetent, or he is evil.

I LOVE reading a good 'incompetent Dumbles' fic. But this story wouldn't let me write it that way.

Chapter Twenty-Four

by Lionheart

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Harry had gone straight from the failed vote at the Geezergamot to the wizarding hospital, where he used Voldemort's skill at mind arts to cure Lockhart so he could employ him as a servant.

Rebuilding much of the celebrity's mind allowed Harry to input all sorts of subliminal suggestions and commands, and one of those was to create a work ethic and drive to study strong enough to MAKE the guy the sort of wizard he'd always claimed to be!

But by inputting loyalty directives into Lockhart's psyche (something which Voldemort excelled at, even without magic) Harry was able to get him back in motion in such a way as to indirectly gain some followers for himself. After all, the fraud had a huge fan base, and if Lockhart followed Harry and his fans followed Lockhart, then suddenly Harry had a power base to work off of. And, by causing Gilderoy to hire tutors to 'get back in fighting form' in the wake of his magical accident, the man himself would become a resource.

It was a perfect setup. The guy never was in fighting form, but now he could blame that on his accident. And the guy had TONS of fame!

If Harry wasn't enough by himself, then perhaps his fame plus Lockhart's together could cause Dumbledore some damage.

Regardless, it was one more iron in the fire, and perhaps among them all, one of Harry's new plots could do him some good. He'd never achieve anything if he didn't keep trying.

Then it was off to collect Luna and Hermione. He met up with his oldest friend first, at the shrine where their new dryad had already grown, and there was nothing special about that meeting save for some rather rushed explanations on both sides and a promise of more later.

Meeting Luna however, while not difficult, also involved meeting with Sirius Black on his rather contrived date with Amelia Bones (who, incidentally, had been awake and listening when the Marauder confessed as to the methods used for stealing her panties).

Shunting the Head of Magical Law Enforcement off into her own little corner so she could review all of the evidence of Sirius' innocence Harry had been collecting (and brought with him), along with Hermione to help her with that burgeoning mound of papers and bottled memories, Harry found himself alone and getting introduced to his godfather for the first time.

Harry was all prepared for this to be stilted and awkward. Being no longer a wide-eyed innocent deprived him of a natural child's reaction, and Voldemort provided no memories on adult emotional bonding.

Luckily, Sirius wasn't having any of that awkwardness nonsense and went and immediately engulfed his godson in a hug. Before Harry's lack of return affection could introduce any awkwardness, Sirius was already giving him a noogie and that erupted into entirely expected squirming and struggling which broke the ice nicely and served to get everyone out of that awkward phase.

Playfulness has its place, after all.

"So, how have the Longbottoms been treating you?" Sirius asked while he was holding his godson upside down and trying to dunk his head in a conjured bucket of water.

"Never met them," Harry replied, using his hands and tipping the bucket over so it sloshed over his godfather's shoes.

"Then who have you been staying with?" Sirius threw Harry down on the table and began wrestling his godson's shirt off - vague plans of chasing a nude Harry through Hogsmead while whipping the Boy Who Lived with a wet towel as a prank in his mind.

"Frankly, I don't know that I've had it much better than you," Harry replied, squirming to get under the table and safe so he could correct his clothes. "After the Dark Lord Dumbledore kidnapped me from you

he sent me to the Dursleys, who tried to beat and starve the magic out of me - with his full knowledge and cooperation."

"That would explain why you are skin and bones," Sirius casually tossed one of Harry's shoes away, just as the boy escaped under the table and to safety. "Also why the old guy never came and talked to me in Azkaban. I had a whole discussion mapped out where I convinced him of my innocence."

Harry summoned the wayward shoe back to him and put it on. "Yeah, he knew you were innocent. But so long as you were my guardian, he couldn't let you free and still control me."

Having conjured a large tub full of soapy water on top of the table, Sirius vanished both tub and table, letting the ice cold soapy water sploosh down over Harry. Grinning at the now soaked boy, Sirius spoke, "That would explain a great many things. But why didn't you try to get emancipated?"

Giving up on defending himself for now, Harry transfigured Sirius's trouser legs into a pair of giant tuna, leaving his godfather to fall over, his legs stuck down the throats of a pair of giant fish. "Oh, I tried. But he used his various positions of authority to block me. I just came from a full session of the Wizengamot, where they voted to support his ban on my emancipation - in spite of their having no excuse to do so. It was an illegal ban."

At this statement, Amelia and Hermione looked up from where they'd been working together, proving they'd been listening in.

Having restored his pants to being pants again, Sirius stood up and flicked his wand toward Harry, causing his wet clothes to transfigure into a nice muggle dress, pink and with frilly lace.

Harry didn't even bother to correct it, giving Sirius a matching outfit in red, plus makeup and lipstick. Sirius had a distinctly disturbed expression on his face as he realized this wasn't a costume change, but a human to human transfiguration - complete with bits change.

"Dang! I'm HOT!!" Sirius looked in a mirror he'd just conjured for the purpose.

"I think I'm going to be ill," Hermione didn't point out that his voice had not been changed, and that manly voice coupled with the very female appearance ... yuck!

"No, I think this could be a good look for me... as a disguise," Sirius added, seeing the looks of revulsion he'd been getting. "You know, avoid the Aurors? It's a game all the rage with escaped convicts like me."

"Actually," Hermione lectured. "Strictly speaking, you're not a convict. That term is short for 'convicted criminal' and you were never 'convicted' of anything because you never had a trial!"

Sirius un-vanished the table. And, with more feminine grace than Hermione possessed, came over and sat down, smoothing his skirts with a practiced motion. "Well, if emancipation for Harry didn't work, then freedom might not for me - so long as Dumbles can gain anything by my being on the run. Since the fight is really over who gets to be Harry's guardian, and Dumbledore is winning, we need to change the rules of the game. How'd you like to be Head of the Black family?"

Luna, standing peacefully in the background this whole time, beamed her joy.

"Wouldn't work, I'm afraid," Harry shook his head, having already restored, cleaned the soap out of, and dried his own clothes. "I'm sure he'd find some way to declare you unfit to be making those decisions, and void it."

"Then I'll declare you ACTING Head!" Sirius proclaimed triumphantly, causing Hermione to vomit in the background as his still very manly voice and female appearance disturbed her greatly. "Since that's exactly what the position is for - the real Head being unable or unfit for whatever reason to make his own decisions, they'll have no excuse to interfere. The purebloods would throw a fit over attempted

intrusion into an internal family matter like that. They'd be up in arms over the mere suggestion of his making the attempt."

"That could work," Harry allowed, nodding.

Sirius folded his arms and was nodding also as he pointed out, "And, Acting as a Clan Head carries all of the rights of actually having that position, so you do an end run around that ban and automatically gain emancipation. He could make theft no longer a crime before he overturned that one. It's too deep into the guts of wizarding government to change."

Sirius smirked and raised his wand. "So. The ideal case is that I make you Acting Head of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black, which grants you full rights as an adult, therefore you have no guardian, so Dumbledore has no more reason to prevent me from getting a trial showing that I'm innocent - since I am no longer his rival for your guardianship!"

"Wow!" someone breathed, impressed in spite of the freaky voice/appearance combination.

"Don't leave out vindictiveness," Harry mused. "Dumbles isn't the sort to let an enemy walk free after getting a hit in on him. He'd try to get his revenge - so long as it wasn't too expensive to him to do so. We should send you ahead to France to prepare a place for us to live. We're going there anyway, and so long as you aren't an easy target, he has better uses for his tyranny."

"But wouldn't they just arrest him there and send him back?" Hermione asked.

Amelia Bones had found herself drawn in, and answered without thinking. "No. There is no right for extradition because he never had a trial, and he can get hold of the Black fortunes there just fine. In fact, should he ask for asylum there they'll almost certainly grant it. The French love showing us English up as incompetent. They always have. It's an ancient rivalry."

"That's true," the Granger girl allowed.

Luna had begun nodding, musing aloud, "Set up a house and properties with sufficient space for us to... actually just buy a muggle farm or vineyard."

Harry smiled. "Well, I was just arranging to transfer everything..."

"You didn't trust the goblins, did you?" Sirius interrupted, fearing the worst.

Harry shook his head. "No. I did everything at the Ministry."

The veteran Marauder sighed with heartfelt relief. "Good. You can't imagine how relieved that makes me. Too often have I seen those raised by muggles imagine they should be goblin friends for having used good manners. Every generation it seems someone thinks that just by being polite and recalling a goblin's name they'll receive preferential treatment. That's bollox. This is England, magical or not. Everyone here who is not a Dark Lord, part of a Dark Lord's posse, or Too Stupid to Live (i.e. works in the Ministry) uses good manners on principle. Goblins just suck."

Sirius sighed and shook his head. "Nearly every muggleborn somehow forms the opinion that if only you take the trouble of recalling a goblin's name they will be all over you about how you are the only one who's ever tried, then be friends with you for life. Nothing could be further from the truth! They're like muggers, in that they hate for those they 'service' to know their names. It offends them something deep, and if they can, they would destroy those that learn them."

He raised an eye to look at Harry. "Your mother thought that when she was a first year, and they nearly trapped her in contracts that would've destroyed her. That's how James met her, he happened by and saved her from that. It got him feeling protective of her, and he kept an eye out for her ever since."

Sirius started shaking his head. "Every so often some moron decides to let the goblins manage their money for them - and they invariably steal it all the first instant they have access, 'investing' it all in

themselves. Or some naive young twit will agree to a service, like vault transfer, on which they've been told there is a 'small fee'. For goblins, a 'small fee' invariably means 'less than half'. So if you ask them to do something trivial and routine, and they say that costs a small fee without telling you a specific amount, expect to lose forty nine percent of whatever money is involved!"

"Yeah," Harry smacked his lips. "I know."

"You mean he wasn't trying to prank you?" Hermione asked, disbelieving.

"No." The Head of Magical Law Enforcement shook her head. "He wasn't, not on that. It's dead accurate."

"'Goblin' is not a nice word. There are reasons for that," Luna agreed, face now deep in an upside-down magazine. "We could call them 'Daisies' and everyone would soon learn to hate the term 'Daisy'. Bad manners brings a very bad reputation, in this case deservedly so. Goblins adore cruelty."

Amelia Bones started to rub her temples. "It's why we made them bankers. Hurting people financially stopped them from trying to kill everyone every twenty to thirty years. Goblin wars were regular as clockwork before that."

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True to their schedule, the trio of Hogwarts students had a good night's sleep then spun back 24 hours. Although they went to bed rather early after sending Amelia and Sirius on their ways (she'd become interested enough in the case to see him safely to France, before coming back to her office in England to begin investigating on the Ministry side, to see if that evidence matched up with theirs), so consequently they got up early.

Very early.

About dawn, actually, which gave them all time to get a couple tasks done before meeting at the pond in the Forbidden Forest to watch

Trelawney become a dryad - something Harry promised himself to watch with more interest this time around.

Part of that time was used by Hermione to drop by the Ministry invisibly and file all the paperwork, signed by Sirius and witnessed by Amelia Bones, alerting them that he made Harry the Acting Head of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black, for as long as Sirius remained indisposed.

Another slip of paper, signed by Harry and Sirius and witnessed again by Amelia, dissolved the marriage of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black, leaving her without a husband, and Draco without a clan.

Sirius himself was happy to go across the channel. He reverted to his own form from the female disguise on the other end, filed the same paperwork and asked asylum from a contact of Amelia's in France. So whatever games Albus got up to on HIS side of the channel, he shouldn't be able to get to it all without presenting a dang good reason - a reason he didn't have.

That done, as well as Luna not having to do the filing herself, freed her up to perform another errand in those early post-dawn hours.

"Hello Uncle Lucius."

Startled awake, Lucius groped for his wand in the darkness of his bedroom and found it missing. Even the secret pull-ring on the headboard had been sealed over with a charm. "Who's there?!"

A smug voice spoke out of the darkness. "It's me... your niece, you only had one sister so it shouldn't be too hard to figure out who I am."

"L... Lanna?" He ventured, trying to catch a glimpse of the girl in the dim light cast in through the draped over windows. "Lum?"

"Luna," she said happily. "Don't worry, you won't forget my name again after today."

"What are you planning to do... Luna?" Lucius asked in an oily tone, it wouldn't be too hard to charm the little bitch and after he'd gotten his wand back...

"I'm going to kill you uncle Lucius," Luna replied. "I'm afraid that you've been misusing the Malfoy fortune. Grandfather always said that Malfoys bow to no one, but you've been on your knees before Vime... Volemart?" She finished uncertainly. "Drat, I knew I should have looked up that silly name he calls himself before coming here. No matter, you've brought nothing but shame and ruin to the Malfoy line and it's long past time that you were pruned."

"My son will..."

"Be disowned," Luna said cheerfully. "Harry's the acting head of family Black and without you to contest it, your marriage to Narcissa will be annulled and she will be cast out of the family. Your... offspring will be without a name and without a fortune, sure is lucky that he has his skills to fall back on isn't it?"

"You won't get away with this," Lucius hissed. "The Dark Lord will..."

"But I already have uncle Lucius," Luna said with a serene smile. "You should be feeling a sharp pain in your chest right about... now. I may be the sole heir to the Malfoy fortune, but even if they suspect something, they'll never suspect me. I'm Loony Lovegood, the girl that has trouble tying her own shoes. I could certainly never murder someone."

The wealthy Death Eater expired, shock and horror on his features.

Luna smiled. She'd gotten the idea from reading a muggle mystery novel. On noting how very different the investigative process was from the one she was familiar with, it struck her that muggles looked for muggle means of foul play, and wizards looked for wizarding ones.

Use muggle means on a wizard, and the wizards investigating would find no magical traces of murder, and conclude the man had simply died in his sleep. Nothing suspicious to investigate.

Smiling, she resumed her invisibility and left the house, nothing for a painting along the halls to see, so no intruders to be chased down. And the poor man hadn't even managed to replace Dobby yet, so there were no house elves around to be avoided.

Within hours Luna Malfoy Lovegood would be a very wealthy witch indeed.

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For the past several days, Hermione had been alternating between annoyed and confused. On top of having more adventures in one day than they usually had in a year, Harry had been acting odd and spending a lot of time around Luna. At first Hermione'd been delighted that summer when he'd cast off the lazy attitude and started working. The letters they'd traded had been the best correspondence of her life!

Now, however, he had suddenly become an expert on so many things... she knew he'd turned around, but she liked to think that she was a genius herself and she had several years of studying head start on him. It wasn't logical that he could catch up and pass her that fast!

She knew she spent most of her time reading and studying. So it wasn't like he could say he'd been doing more of that than her. Maybe more than she'd done over this summer, she did vacation with her parents after all, but NOT more than she'd done in her two years of schooling before that!

Hermione could allow him to become an expert on one or two things during that short a space of time. She knew he'd been hiding a brilliant brain under that slacker attitude for a long time now, and this summer she knew she'd seen him start to use it. In their letters she'd watched him bloom from a no-nothing wonder drone to a dedicated student who was driven to excel, and it had honestly ranked among the most beautiful experiences of her life to see him make that transition.

However, it made no sense for him to suddenly be an expert on everything!

In their school subjects it was obvious to her that he wasn't being challenged. He finished all of his work before her, and even helped check hers over for errors! She was Hermione Granger! She was FAMOUS for having error-free homework!! And while he couldn't point out spelling or grammar mistakes, because she didn't make any, he'd OFTEN point out a tip or two about their subject that the teacher hadn't explained, frequently casting new light over the entire topic and causing her to rewrite several feet of parchment!

However much she'd wanted to congratulate him for being a good student, that wasn't normal, to say nothing of him knowing about wards or magical creature lore or ancient objects, material that wasn't even taught in school!

There was also this new relationship with Luna. Before this year, Harry had been almost painfully shy. He'd shrink from human contact so it made one feel cruel for even approaching him, as he'd shy away in unconscious ways, acting like a beaten animal.

It had been enough to make Hermione feel socially expert by comparison, and she was used to spending her time alone, without friends.

But how he carried himself now was completely different. It was nothing like the Harry she knew from last year, and Luna seemed to be a key difference. The Harry from their letters over the summer had been the same person, shy and ignorant and just coming out of his shell in both those departments.

Then, something happened on the train.

One obvious suspect was the dementors, but she'd recently read up on that subject and they were never known to improve or unblock a person. Their kiss was death, worse than normal death in fundamental and horrible ways.

Part of her wanted to put all of Harry's changes down to his recent brush with that and his return to mortality. He'd very nearly died, and that often changed a person.

However, it didn't explain where his newfound knowledge came from.

Then Luna came abruptly into the picture. Another part of Hermione figured that the two of them had discovered their hormones together and she was honestly happy that they had picked up a new hobby. Doing 'that' with a girl was supposed to make boys more confident, which could explain some social differences. But then she started noticing little things that threw off that theory and that made her confused again.

Hermione had always hated being confused so that made her annoyed, after calming she again considered her friend's odd behavior which made her confused and restarted the entire cycle. So it was no surprise that she had jumped at the chance when Harry had requested that she make time for a serious discussion. The fact that the discussion was with Luna Lovegood with all people was threatening to push her into confusion again.

The trio had come to the hedged area around the shrine to the Fairy Queen and were just waiting the half an hour or so before the past Harry showed up to give Trelawney the potion that transformed her.

Harry had set up an invisible tent in a corner by the hedge while they were waiting, then left the girls to have their privacy for this discussion. Luna watched patiently as Hermione poked her head inside the tent's living room.

The Ravenclaw took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. Harry had given her the opportunity to do something she'd never thought she'd be able to achieve on her own, something she'd wanted since she was a small girl. He'd given her a means to avenge her mother. Luna Lovegood was an odd girl by all accounts, but she always paid her debts and as far as she was concerned, she owed Harry everything. With a silent nod, she resolved to do everything in her power to make their match a happy one, even if that meant sharing him. She wouldn't see her friend was trapped in a loveless marriage.

"Have a seat please," Luna gestured to a chair as Hermione walked into the room. "Did Harry tell you why I wished to meet with you?"

"No Luna," Hermione replied, suddenly struck by the idea that she had no idea what Luna Lovegood knew. Being a pureblood and thus raised around magic, she could know anything, and one potential excuse for Harry to know what he did was she might be magically controlling him. Suspicious, her hand reached for her wand. "He didn't."

"Hermione," Luna sighed. "Harry's secrets are his to tell, not mine. If you want to know, just ask him. And you should learn to hide your emotions better... I had to."

"Oh." Hermione relaxed a tad, feeling somewhat guilty for having been caught suspecting a friend like that. Making sure to keep her wand accessible, she regarded the other girl with a guarded look. "What's this about Luna?"

"Harry is going to marry me," Luna declared calmly. "It's necessary because of an arrangement between our families," she explained. "The benefits are rather large and consequences of ignoring it are rather dire. But before we went any further with our plans I wanted to know if you would like a position in our household."

"What?" Hermione squawked. "I knew you'd been planning on it, but when did Harry agree?"

"When he took his position as Acting Head of House Black," the blonde replied serenely. "As I said, it was a family arrangement."

"That's barbaric!" Hermione was appalled.

"Barbaric or not, it's what is going to happen." Luna sighed. "Hermione, I would like you to promise to hear me out."

"About what, Luna?"

"Promise."

"Ok, I promise to listen to you."

"Good," Luna said with a satisfied smile. "Because I need your help to resolve a very difficult issue. Back when Narcissa Black married Lucius Malfoy the two families entered into a binding magical agreement. This morning Lucius died, but not before both Heads of the Black family annulled his marriage and cast out his son. This was necessary to deny the Malfoy fortunes to Lord Voldemort, who you ought to know from your experiences in your first year still exists as a shade and is trying to regain a mortal body. But it leaves us caught in something of a corner. Lucius was my uncle, and as the last Malfoy by blood I must marry a Black in order to avert some dreadful consequences for both our families."

"It all seems to be rather clear cut," Hermione decided, hiding her emotions. "Harry has to marry you. I don't know what's the problem you need my help on."

Instead of answering, Luna put her wand to her temple and drew out a thread of memory, placing it in a large, wide bowl that had been placed by her elbow in anticipation.

Above the silvery liquid, an image formed of Harry speaking. He sighed. "Luna I agree that I promised you protection, and I agree to the necessity of taking Malfoy's fortunes out of Voldemort's camp. When we came up with this plan I'd only just gotten interested in Hermione, and I thought I could let her down easily. But the thought of breaking up with her is causing me pain, and rather than do that I find myself steadily growing closer to her."

"Luna," the image of Harry declared. "I love Hermione. I always have. I know now I always will. I'm afraid that if I have to choose between you we must consider our wedding off. I'm sorry, but I could never cause her grief, and it kills my heart to think of parting with her."

The image shrank down into the bowl as Hermione blinked furiously at it.

The blonde favored the brunette with her clear blue eyes. "Now as I said, I'd like you to consider taking a position in our household. Harry has grown to depend on your assistance and I do not believe that he could live without it at this time. Before you agree you should know that no matter what your title might be, people will assume that you are Harry's mistress."

"Luna I'd never..."

"Don't say never," Luna interrupted. "Because one of the positions I'd like you to consider taking is the position of Harry's mistress... one of them anyway."

"Mistress?" Hermione squeaked, glancing at her quickly before her eyes went back to the now quiescent bowl.

"It's expected that a wizard of his social standing will have at least one mistress," Luna instructed calmly. "Or a stable of boys I suppose... it's not important which. Before you say anything, I think you should know that you don't actually have to do anything and you would have several opportunities that would otherwise not exist."

"What do you mean by opportunities?" Hermione was still blinking at the bowl.

The blonde felt her heart swell with triumph that the girl could even ask. "A muggleborn witch has only a few options for success in our world: she can marry into a higher social strata, may be able to find a low level position in the Ministry if she knows who to be 'friendly' to, she can leave the magical world as most do, or become the kept woman of a rich wizard. If she chooses the latter then several career choices open up to her. Wouldn't want to annoy her patron after all."

The muggleborn's horrified eyes lifted from the now nearly-forgotten bowl. "I had no idea that magical society was so... so..."

"Bigoted? Insular? Backward?" Luna suggested. "Didn't you ever wonder why Arthur Weasley holds the position he does? Didn't you ever wonder why our Muggle Studies Professor is a proper pureblood rather than a muggleborn? Doesn't it seem odd to you that both

people who have those jobs are clueless wizards who know less about muggle society than the average four year old muggle child? Why do you suppose they keep choosing ignorant purebloods for those positions instead of someone who might actually be qualified?"

"It never... I didn't..."

"You were too distracted by how wonderful magic is and you never thought to look under the surface," Luna chided gently. "All I am saying is that Harry needs you, you wouldn't have to... to do things with him if you didn't want to, and it would be to your benefit to agree to my proposal."

"You're supposed to be his wife Luna," Hermione said in distress. "Why are you asking me to do these things?"

"Our match is not based on love," Luna began. Suddenly the girl looked very vulnerable. "I hope it will be... I certainly like Harry, he... he was nice to me when not many people are. I want Harry to be happy to be with me and I want to defeat Voldemort, your presence will help with both of those goals."

Hermione swallowed and looked once more at the bowl. "Why do I have to be a mistress? Didn't Harry just say that he wanted to marry me?"

Luna sighed. "He must marry me to fulfill our family obligations. Our other option would be for him to marry both of us, but that would be considerably more awkward."

Hermione drilled Luna with her gaze. "I thought you said while polygamy was acceptable in the Fairy Realm, it wasn't among wizards?"

"I said different," the blonde qualified. "I never said they were opposed to polygamy, only that they had a different view on it than the fey. There is nothing strictly illegal about having multiple wives, it is merely frowned upon. They prefer mistresses, as it makes lines of descent clearer."

She focused her clear eyes on her friend. "Most cultures, once they've been around a couple hundred years or so, have passed rules both for and against practically anything you could name. The secret to doing what you want is to emphasize those rules that are for it, and downplay those that are against. I think there's still a fifty galleon fine per wife after the first, which was a fortune back in the day it was placed, but nowadays is trivial."

"So Harry could have a whole Harem?" Hermione felt shocked.

"That's legally acceptable but socially quite awkward." Luna evaluated. "It used to be considered a sign of wealth to have multiple wives or concubines. It's not done so much, anymore, because very few people want to go through all the legal rubbish. Usually, it's just mistresses. The sex is the same, just fewer legal hassles and no fighting among the wives over whose child is heir. However, for us that wouldn't be so much of an issue. You could bear the Potter and perhaps the Black heirs, while mine could be for the Malfoy and Lovegood lines."

The Granger girl considered this carefully. "I supposed that could work."

Instantly her arms were full of sobbing blonde. "Oh Hermione!" Luna sobbed gratefully. "Thank you! Thank you SO much! I was so afraid that you'd make Harry choose between us, and if you did I knew that I would lose. He is very fond of me, and it could grow into more, but he honestly loves you. It's something I'm quite envious of, actually," the girl moaned in her shoulder.

Hermione grinned, her place in the world now certain, she was no longer confused. "Well, in that case why don't we go tell Harry the good news?"

"Both of us," Luna nodded firmly, collecting herself. Wiping a tear, she declared, "We can handle the social fallout."

Hermione quirked a smile. "And I always wanted a sister."

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Author's Notes:

In the first place, yes Harry just acquired Lockhart as a source of minions, and they are moving operations to France to be more outside Dumbledore's primary sphere of influence.

If he's unbeatable in Britain that's because he heads virtually all branches of government there. Move to another country and that's no longer true.

I've always wondered about those stories where they stay right where Albus gets them most under his thumb - after they learn he's up to no good!

Also, I am boggled by how many stories want to treat goblins as though they were as kind and sweet as Santa's elves, only waiting for you to be called a 'good' child before they shower you with gifts and blessings.

So many fics treat goblins as misunderstood angels who will make everything better if only given their chance.

I say forget that! They are mean little evil critters and they're never shown being anything else! In fact, the one time one of them is trusted to do a thing for our heroes, he betrays them!

And the entire race collaborates with Voldemort!

No, I see 'goblin worship' as a pathetic expression of the fact that everything else is so FUBAR in the Harry Potter series that people are willing to do just about anything to INVENT a good side, and attribute good qualities to virtually anyone, desperately trying to see SOMETHING good in that mess Rowling calls her series! Rather than the bunch of amateur crime syndicates duking it out over who gets control of what the books actually come off as.

Chapter Twenty-Five by Lionheart

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Goblins were tortured by Voldemort? Well, boo hoo! So were DEATH EATERS! That doesn't mean they didn't serve him!!

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The creation of a dryad was a thing of pure beauty. Inwardly Harry was amazed that he'd been so crass as to not appreciate it the first time around. The magical effect was something on the order of the Northern Lights, only more special because you knew you were never liable to see this again.

It was an amazing kaleidoscope of magical energy accompanied, like a good symphony often had fireworks, by lovely bursts of growth of a fantastically beautiful tree. This went quite in deep past the normal senses so you felt the beauty of this special occasion deep in your bones.

And speaking of bones, thanks to the potion now integral to her being, Sybil Trelawney still considered Harry her best friend, and immediately after her creation as a dryad seemed determined to show him what benefits there were to being friends with a wood-nymph.

Far from what the carnally minded might suppose, she wanted to give herself to him in an entirely different way than one might suspect. So, get your mind out of the gutter, she didn't want to jump on him and drag him between the sheets. No, what she did was jump on him, grab his wand, then throw it away behind him.

She immediately followed this by pulling a wand-shaped spring of white oak out of the very air around her and sliding that into his wand holster. It was quite a bit different in size and shape than his holly, or even his yew wand, but that didn't seem to matter to her.

Before Harry could get his wits about him, Trelawney had yanked both his wands and replaced them. Then she'd pulled that trunk of emergency stores out of that locket around his neck, dumped its contents out all across the lawn, then tossed the now empty trunk away back over her shoulder and into the pond, where the naiads caught it and dragged it under, never to be seen by mortal eyes again.

Soon he came to realize, as she frisked him for more wooden goods that she could find and replace, that Sybil was determined to get rid of all the wooden objects he owned and give him white oak in their place.

It was only after that ran through his mind that the correlation came to him and he realized what was going on. SHE was the heart and soul, a very frisky and mobile soul, but the soul all the same, of a white oak tree, and she was bound and determined that all the wood he owned HAD to be white oak!

Sybil was literally giving him pieces of herself!

He took out one of his new wands and stared at it in wonder, floored by the concept of what had just happened, even as Trelawney knocked him on his back and started rifling through his pockets, pulling out the other trunks there that he'd bought and prepared to serve as emergency kits for Luna and Hermione, even rifling his belongings for tool handles or picture frames!

Muggles used plastic for a wide variety of things, but wizards did not, so they made them instead with wood, leather or metal, which gave Trelawney a wide assortment of things to be replacing just out of his safari kit alone. Even the barrel of phoenix ash got discovered, dumped out, and replaced by a barrel of white oak, and his Nimbus 2,000 got tossed callously aside into a bush.

Nor did it seem to stop there. Harry was too flabbergasted to move as the dryad finished inspecting him for stray bits of not-her-wood, and finding him clean, moved along and immediately pounced on Hermione, once again tossing her wand casually away and frisking her like a cop looking for contraband.

It was now apparently against some natural law, in the dryad's mind, for any one of the three of them to own any wooden object that wasn't actually a part of her, and so she once again immediately pounced upon Luna once the girl had started creeping away.

A set of hooves stepped into the range of Harry's stunned vision, and the boy looked up to see Firenze, the Centaur from his first year. "Quickly lad!" the creature urged. "Beg her on my behalf for wood for a bow!"

"Why would I want to do that?" Harry's mind was spinning.

The centaur regarded him for a moment. "Because, Harry Potter, every tool you have is one more thing to use in your fight versus evil. You know that. So if you would beg the dryad for a bow for me to use, I will teach you and your handmaidens archery."

"He accepts!" Hermione appeared over the fallen boy, then rolled him up to go shoo him off towards Luna. He shot her a questioning look while she was doing this, and Hermione whispered fiercely in his ear. "Did you not expect me to start looking stuff up when you and Luna started showing all this magical creature knowledge? All the best Greek heroes were taught by centaurs, Harry! But it's been more than two thousand years since one offered! Of course you're going to accept! I just saved you some time, that's all."

"Sybil?" Hermione approached the dryad that looked remarkably like her, dragging a stunned Harry along behind her. "Harry here would like to learn archery, and the centaur Firenze has offered to teach us if you would give us bows to learn on, and one for our teacher, of course."

The dryad looked up at them from where she'd just finished frisking Luna for wooden belongings and beamed a smile. Sybil had already presented Harry with wood from her own tree for wands and stuff: two wands for Harry, one for each girl, and six trunks, but did not seem to be the least inclined to stop there. She immediately hopped up perkily and granted them wood for bows (and sixty matching arrows apiece),

staves, spears, javelins and furniture, too, outfitting their shared tent with chairs and tables and beds all made up of bits of her.

Harry reached up and whispered to his friend, "I can understand why she likes me, but why is she doing this for you and Luna?"

"Well, of COURSE she is only outfitting us because we belong to you, Harry! Have you no appreciation for how a woman thinks?" the bookworm eyed him askance.

"Obviously not," he muttered.

Focusing on something he could control and understand, Harry pilfered the leaf with the ritual for freeing Fawkes on it out of Hermione's pocket, and began to look it over.

He'd only been studying it a moment before he declared, "The ritual to free a phoenix will take two solid weeks to perform, but we can't start it right away as it requires ingredients I don't have on hand. I'll have to find some of these, and they are not exactly common."

He looked up and, seeing he had regained Hermione's attention, favored her with a wry smirk. "However, just because we can't do this one right away doesn't mean we can't keep that cup busy. We can spend some of that time usefully, as we have more of the materials on hand to run through more copies of the ritual we've just been through - the one to make things immune to fire, and I need to outfit you girls in silver weapons and armor anyway. Also, the Queen said our adding the materials to make cloth from to the ritual had been a good idea, we could do more of that."

Actually, they could do far more than that, as there was no reason why they couldn't get Trelawney as immune to fire as they were, as the Fairy Queen HAD said that fairies could take advantage of rituals meant for humans... it was worth a shot. He had no plans to add extra magical artifacts to the pot this time, only magic materials like living silver and a few more rolls of dragonhide, and so on. The Queen had as much as said those were alright.

They certainly weren't going to throw another Time Turner into the mix!

With additional materials they could make extra outfits. Extra outfits were... well, Harry's friends were both girls and you could see it in their eyes that they had no plans to be happy with only one outfit each - no matter they could be charmed clean, would never wear out, had charms that could keep them a perfect fit forever and would repair most damage. They simply had to have more clothes than one impenetrable outfit, no matter how nice.

Not to mention that it could do Trelawney a ton of good for herself and her tree to be impervious to heat and flames. Actually, come to think of it, they could be almost certain that empowering the dryad body through the ritual would empower her tree also. That was the point. But a potential downside to that was that, should a Dark Lord ever learn they'd done so, he could search the whole Forbidden Forest for her pretty easily by simply lighting that place on fire and watching for whichever tree didn't burn.

Then again, NOT putting her through the ritual was no better, as a potential Dark Lord routinely made decisions like, 'If I can't have you, no one shall!' and might just as easily cause a massive forest fire to destroy her if they hadn't put her through the fire protection ritual.

Dark Lords did things like that often.

So really, they had to (for Harry's peace of mind if nothing else) run the new dryad through the fire protection ritual, else massive forest fires might put her at risk no matter how they got caused. Forest fires were really the one thing a dryad had that she might reasonably fear with good cause. Muggles had unknowingly exterminated hundreds of them that way, and wizards were no better, having knowingly exterminated a few using that method.

So, to prevent someone like Dumbles from scorching every tree in the forest to look for her, find her tree, and thus have some element of leverage to use against her, they had to protect more than Trelawney's tree. That's fine, it would be better all around and a fine work all told if they simply applied this to all the dryads of the forest.

There were several dozen dryads populating the place, left over from better days, and by the time they got them all done all the small fairies ought to have been treated too.

And, if they ran a few sacks of ordinary seeds through the process, the Forbidden Forest would have a large number of trees that wouldn't burn. Lighting the place on fire wouldn't tell you much of anything then. Maybe pare down the numbers a little, but nothing worth torching the place for.

Hermione had paused for a moment examining her friend while he thought.

"Harry?" she brushed hair out of her face. "I've been meaning to ask, but why do you wear armor, anyway?"

The boy gave her a shrug. "To help protect me in fights."

Her face screwed up. "Yes, but nothing can stop a killing curse. So why bother?"

He gave her a short laugh. "I bother because very few of the spells getting throw in combat are killing curses, or Unforgivables of any sort. They cost too much energy, and are too easily interrupted or blocked."

Seeing her inhale to disagree, he interjected quickly, "I know they SAY that none of them can be blocked, but really all they MEAN is that there is no spell to counter them. To an imaginative mind, there are dozens if not hundreds of ways to prevent getting hurt by one. Dodging out of the way is popular and works every time you can pull it off. Conjuring or summoning things for them to run into is another very popular method. So they CAN be stopped! They just mean that nobody knows a counterspell."

Turning around, he sat down where he could face her. "Hermione, everything has a counter, even if that is just throwing a sofa in its way. It may not be an easy block, or even one you know, but they all have them. Now, what happens in a fight is that one person throws all he can at another person, while that person does the same, throwing it

back at him. Each person blocks what he can, dodges what he must, and tries to throw enough variety at the other person so that something gets through. Do you follow me so far?"

She gave him a nod of confirmation.

"Very good," he nodded to accept that. "Now there are two general ways to measure strength in combat: how much variety you have in things you can throw and block, and how much magical strength you possess. A very strong mage can still be defeated handily by someone throwing stuff he doesn't know how to block. Also, a very versatile person can be overpowered by spells too strong for him to stop, that just batter right through his shields. You still with me?"

She nodded again, fully absorbed with what he was telling her.

"Good," he declared. "Now, spells used in combat generally fall into three loose categories: stuff that inconveniences, stuff that injures, and stuff that kills. People throw all three because anything that gets through is going to do some harm and give you a small advantage, perhaps even win the fight for you. A simple Jelly-Legs jinx may not seem like much, but if it hits then your enemy is going to have a much greater problem dodging other spells."

The girl nodded more firmly now.

"Very good," he acknowledged her attention, secretly pleased by it. "Things that inconvenience are very easily stopped by shielding spells. You aren't going to blow through my Protego with a tickling charm, but if I don't block it with one you'd still win because I'd be laughing too hard to speak any spells."

She nodded again, and he smiled.

"More people in combat try throwing stuff that wounds. Cutting curses and bludgeoners and stuff like them for the most part. A Back-Breaking curse is going to stop any fight, if it gets through. This kind of stuff CAN be stopped by shields, but it can also punch right through them if they are strong enough. Most of the time you see wizards fighting, each of them will be standing in a shield spell,

battering at the other guy with stuff to injure him - or knock down his shield. In those kind of fights, the weaker guy loses every time, but the winner is also exhausted."

"Alright," she nodded, and he could see her assimilating this information.

He smiled. "Stuff that kills costs a huge amount of energy, and usually time, to throw. They generally get flung when the other guy is distracted, often busy dodging something else so you have an extra second to get it out. This kind people just dodge, as they cost too much to stop."

"So where does having armor fit in?" she blurted curiously.

Harry leaned back, grinning at her as he tapped his chest plate with a silver gauntleted finger. "Any spell that evokes a physical force can be stopped by physical means. Cutting curses and bludgeoning hexes and stuff like them make up most of the spells thrown in combat, and both kinds are EXACTLY what this armor is best at stopping! So, if I am wearing this, I don't have to exhaust my magical energy on shields to block the kind of thing shields are worst at blocking. No slashing spell or bone-breaking hex is getting through this armor. It just can't happen. So that means most of the spells that get thrown in combat aren't going to hurt me, and I can focus more of my power and attention on stopping the other stuff or hurting the other guy."

He grinned at her. "So, if you and I were in a fight, and I DON'T have to block half your spells, but you MUST block or dodge all of mine, I already have a considerable advantage. If I can ignore half of yours, I automatically have time to throw more back at you, and suddenly you are overworked trying to block or counter everything. So you start spending more time on defense, so you're unable to throw as much at me, so I can throw even more at you as I have to spend less and less time countering yours. And pretty soon, if I am doing most of the attacking and you little but defending, something will get through to hit you and I'll win."

He shot her a triumphant grin. "Like I said before, MOST people use the two general ways of measuring strength in combat: spell versatility and magical strength. But both of them are subtly wrong. What matters most is time. If I can fling more spells than you, then something is going to get through, and pretty much no matter what it is I hit you with it will grant me enough extra advantage that I'll win. And the two ways to get more time are either to cast your spells faster, which is a good thing to learn how to do, or get some kind of advantage like my armor, where I can simply ignore some kinds of spells. You gain the time it would've taken to defend yourself otherwise, to use on other things. That's the big reason why we did the fire protection ritual, so that if someone throws a fire spell at us, we can ignore it and shoot a spell back instead of wasting time on evoking a counter."

Harry gave her a serious look. "Really, it's all about time. In battle, no one will ever have enough time to do even all of the really critical things. You must learn to choose not just what is a good thing to do, but the best possible use for your time and energy. War is all about who can throw the most violence the enemy's way the fastest."

Seeing she was absorbing this, he waited until she nodded.

So he smiled. "Good. Now, if your enemy came upon you wearing armor like this, how ought you to attack him?"

"Killing spells, because wounding spells won't function," she answered firmly.

"Close, but wrong," he corrected, raising a finger to admonish her. "Killing spells take precious time and energy and are easy to interrupt. It's not just about syllables spoken, deadly spells take a second of magical buildup that less costly spells don't have. So if you try to throw one, and I hit you with a very fast-cast hex during the middle of your spell, it will be interrupted and lost. That's the primary drawback to the deadly curses."

She blinked, honestly surprised by this information.

He gave her a grin. "No, it may seem counter-intuitive, but what you want to throw at an armored opponent are spells to inconvenience. Because they don't, as a rule, invoke a physical force so they can't be blocked by physical means. A bludgeoning curse throws crushing force, as do bone-breaking and back-breaking hexes. Crushing forces, as well as cutting ones, are exactly what armor is best at stopping. But a simple Jelly-Legs jinx doesn't do that. It doesn't evoke a physical force at all. It just makes your legs weak as water, which is NOT something that armor can stop! Stunners or petrifying spells or disarming hexes can all take down someone armored like I am now."

"But those are all easily stopped by shields," she objected, quoting him from before.

"Yes, that's correct," he agreed. "However by forcing me to cast a shield to stop them you have still forced me to react more than if you'd flung a hex that I could just ignore. And if I put up a shield, you can STILL cast a Cutting Curse at it to take down my shield - and force me to cast another or get hit by your next stunner. Shields create a field of force around you, they stop spells before they even hit armor. So even though my armor could ignore a cutting curse, my shield can't. They aren't designed that way. So it'll waste energy stopping a spell, even if I didn't need that particular spell stopped."

A light seemed to go on in Hermione's eyes. "So, against an armored person, fling inconveniencing spells they have to stop with shields, then batter down those shields with injuring spells!"

Harry nodded. "Even though the injuring spells can't hurt you personally, they can still take down your shield," he agreed. "And when the shield drops, cast more inconveniencing spells. You'll still be at a disadvantage, but not as much a one if you have a usable strategy like that."

"Wow!" she shone brilliantly with her newfound understanding.

Harry beamed just to see her happy. "And minor inconveniencing stuff is all generally very fast to cast and takes low energy. That makes them excellent for interrupting another person's spell. So, if Voldemort were to leap up out of the leaf rubbish this instant and start

to throw a killing curse at you, but you hit him with a fast tickling charm before he got it off, you'd ruin his spell and thus not have to block or dodge to avoid it."

Hermione beamed, then exploded into excited energy, grabbing his arm and dragging him off. "Let's go try it out!"

However, regardless of their intentions, that burst of energy got interrupted by the pair of them tripping over the ruins of a smashed up desk, catching themselves only on the flinders of a ruined bookcase. A smashed up portable lab and kitchen lay atop the pile.

Harry recognized the detritus at once.

"She just ruined my stuff," Harry stated in shock. That portable furniture had made up the only 'room' that had ever been truly his.

"She was jealous," Hermione declared, an amused smile on her lips.

"Of FURNITURE?!" Harry blurted out.

His bushy haired friend struggled hard to stifle a laugh. "Well, it was wood, and it was yours, but it wasn't hers. She couldn't bear the competition."

"So she destroyed it?" he wondered aloud.

"Well, yes." Hermione gloated, pleased to understand something he didn't.

Luna appeared at their side. "Harry, you don't have any idea how rare and unique Trelawney is, do you? While there MAY be another nymph in the world that has a functioning human magical core, history has no record of it - Ever! But she not only has all of the powers of a witch, she is still an oracle too. That makes her every bit as rare and wonderful as Excaliber, the sword of King Arthur, and if she wants to give you parts of herself to keep near you, you are to smile and say 'Yes, dear' and kiss her in thanks for that wonderful gift. Is that clear?" Her eyes twinkled merrily at him.

"Yes dear." He nodded. "Umm..."

"Yes Harry?"

"How did she get passed my Bookcase-Fidelius?" He didn't mention the wand-holster Fidelius because he figured that was redundant, anything that got passed the one could bypass the other.

Hermione giggled. "Harry, NO ONE can hide secrets from a seer! Any oracle at all can act like Fidelius charms simply don't exist! I admit to being puzzled by that as well, so I looked it up. You have a good book on that charm, did you know that? Anyway, for that matter, you don't have to be a full oracle, even the slightest degree of Second Sight will do just fine, and most fairies have some degree of it. Yes, it is a very good protection against mortal wizards, but you mustn't forget there are other creatures out there."

"Ultimate defenses aren't," Harry agreed, shaking his head. "Right. Sorry for forgetting that."

Luna smiled brightly and started tugging on Harry's arm. "Trelawney has been including one of her acorns in every wooden piece she gives us, wanting always to be with you (there is a small acorn hidden in the handle of each wand, staff, etc). Plus, she has just given you two dozen bookcases to enchant for yourself, and replacements for all these other things!"

Hermione, who had just rushed off, came running back with a radiant smile beaming on her face. "I gave Trelawney a posh antique furniture catalog so she could study options and features. I had it on hand because I was thinking about making myself a set of portable furniture like Harry's, but I think she likes it better."

Both girls met gazes with laughing eyes. What neither said, but both either knew or could figure out, was that Trelawney had instantly taken to studying it like it was an underwear catalog and she was plotting a seduction.

"There's no nails," Harry objected, inspecting one of his new bookcases.

"Nails are actually a very bad way to secure things together." Hermione said authoritatively, brushing hair back out of her eyes, disturbed by her short run. "My mother likes to restore antiques. So I know. Nails work themselves loose, and enlarge the holes they are driven into, eroding the strength of an object over time. They are only ever used because they are fast, cheap and easy. Joinery is far superior as far as strength and durability are concerned, fitting things together like interlocking puzzle pieces, but it costs more time and effort to do it that way. Only Trelawney can do better yet. She doesn't need to create planks or boards. She can grow objects that are solid wood in any shape she desires, making them all one piece without any joints at all!"

The bushy haired girl glowed as though the triumph was her own.

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Author's Notes:

Don't get too excited by the wands just yet. Sybil is not a wand-crafter, just a dryad.

Also, I can't believe that people would defend goblins by saying that Voldy-burger killed some.

So?!

Dying to Voldemort isn't any degree of a measure of your opposition to him. In fact, serving him is almost a guarantee of torture by him! And if you failed to have correct beliefs, or wavered in service, then he killed you. So bodies dropping left and right out of torture and killing curses was far more a mark of Voldemort's SERVANTS than his ENEMIES!!

If you served him you got tortured, guaranteed. Whereas if you opposed him you were far more likely to just live normally until you die - something I'm sure the Death Eaters left out of their recruitment speeches.

Chapter Twenty-Six by Lionheart

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It took the trio some time to gather all of their belongings and put everything away again in their proper places, using only the approved-of wooden objects to store them in, of course!

By then it was late enough in the day that when they got back to the Clearing of Solstices and Equinoxes they found it as they'd left it after reclaiming their belongings, and they wasted no time in getting everything started again in order to get it ready for the dryads as soon as possible.

For one thing, Harry felt certain that making Trelawney the dryad fireproof ought to extend to her tree, as she and her tree were one. And if her tree why not wood she'd grown from it? All of his wooden belongings were now a part of her, and he felt sure that even if the bookcases, wands and things she'd given him didn't get the fire protection properties right away, Sybil would be only too happy to reabsorb and then reissue them to him.

The greater the portion of his belongings that were impervious to heat and fire, the less he'd lose if he ever got careless around a fire spell, and thus a greater advantage in being able to ignore hostile ones.

They'd found Bellatrix is out in the forest, fighting acromantulas, trying to fill her lord's command to protect Harry's body. And having heard about the spiders being involved in Dumbledore's plans to kill him, she'd gone straight to the worst parts of the forest looking for him.

Hermione had NOT been pleased to find out the Headmaster had immediate plans to kill her as a plot to weaken and control Harry.

Not wasting time on upset, Harry had gone 'Dark Lord' mode in order to congratulate the woman, then sent her off to Gringotts to retrieve out of her vault a couple suits of silver armor, and accompanying silver weapons for the girls.

After Hermione shared his explanation for why they were needed with Luna, both girls were very eager to get them. But then of course he had to explain why and how he was in control of a Death Eater - an infamous one at that!

That explanation, the full one anyway, promised to take some time, so he put that off by offering a partial yet still accurate one, telling them about the prophecy where Voldy would mark him as his equal, and that had apparently included memories and skills that had been locked away in there somewhere until shaken loose by almost being kissed by a dementor.

"That explains so many things..." Hermione trailed off thoughtfully.

"Yeah, well, just keep it quiet," Harry muttered darkly. "Can you imagine what the rumors would be if anyone thought I had a Dark Lord in my head? They got bad enough when I was just a parselmouth."

Hermione suddenly stiffened as the implications hit her. After all, Quirrel had been possessed during their first year...

Luna giggled merrily. "Hermione, don't forget, Harry survived a visit to the shrine, something I can assure you no evil thing could ever do, regardless of invitations. And there is also the fact that we've all been reborn, remade as fairy creatures by the Fairy Queen. If there was any extra soul in there, she would've gotten rid of it. It's not like she wouldn't be able to tell when she was changing what bodies our souls reside in."

The Granger girl relaxed visibly, then looked embarrassed about it. As if to hide her shame for having suspected Harry in the first place, the girl went over to the still sleeping salamander in its kiln, drew her new oak wand, and cast a spell to begin harvesting blood from it...

...only nothing happened.

Luna sidled up to her and slipped the girl her original vine wood wand with dragon heartstring core, saying, "Here. I picked it up from the

lawn while our dryad wasn't looking. Harry got both of his, and I also retrieved mine."

"I also retrieved my broom," Harry added sheepishly. "I even salvaged the broken desks and other furniture. I can't keep them, but I can give them to the Weasley twins as a present. They'll make good use of them."

Wondering why the blonde would slip this to her as surreptitiously as a drug trade, Hermione goggled, "But WHY?"

Luna eyed her oddly. "Do you want Trelawney to take them all away again?"

The bookworm blathered uncomfortably. "Well, yes... I mean no. But why would she... I mean the wands she gave us, why don't they work?"

Luna smiled, and noting Harry sidle closer to hear, instructed them both. "Hermione, while the sprigs she gave us are unquestionably the best wood for wands anyone has ever wielded in the British Isles, or perhaps anywhere, a proper wand is more than a stick of wood - no matter how wonderful."

"So how do we make a proper one?" The bookworm settled herself in for a proper lecture.

Luna sadly, had to disappoint her. "No one knows."

"WHAAAT??" Bushy hair stood upright.

"Perhaps that should be better put." Luna sighed. "Hermione, as you've no doubt observed, the wizarding world is still a very medieval society, despite all the changes that have occurred in the muggle one. And it's not just limited to how we dress. Our government, though it has adopted certain outward forms, still follows very medieval rules of influence and privilege. But also wizards still possess a very medieval economy - and that extends to things like government enforced monopolies and trade guilds who control virtually all business, all of

which is headed up by the old families, who run the entire thing for their own benefit."

She briefly met both Harry and Hermione in the eyes. "The secrets of proper wand manufacture are known to very few. In fact only two families in all the United Kingdom can study wand creation without breaking the law, and we do not number among them. All of the old families have carved out little niches for themselves like that, cutting up our economy into many tiny monopolies. It is how the Old Families retain their wealth and power."

Luna gazed at them frankly. "There are only four wand crafters in the whole of the British Isles. Books on the subject are few, hard to find, and heavily restricted, being contraband to all but members of those two families. So not only do we not know how to select appropriate materials or match them up to each other, or even how to insert cores, we lack the normal magical treatments which make a wand much, much more efficient than the simple combination of its materials."

Luna raised her own wand and twinkled a smile. "So, tender feelings of dryads aside, we need to keep our old wands."

"So the old wizarding families work on a system of monopolies?" Hermione blinked in shock, astounded that anyone could be so backwards.

"Yes," Harry confirmed.

"So, what's the Dumbledore family one?" his best friend questioned.

The boy considered. "Hmm, loads. They've acquired dozens over the years of Albus Dumbledore's tenure in government; most held in a complicated array of proxies and so on as they were never LEGALLY his, but practically they are, as for all intents and purposes he controls them. He certainly gets all the money from them, which is despicable, as most he controls are ones he holds 'in trust' from his own followers he's destroyed - like my parents."

Both girls goggled.

Harry sighed. "But if you mean, 'what did they start out with?' I'd have to say they became a true 'pureblood' family when Dumbledore's grandfather got the ink monopoly in the magical world, and then convinced a giant squid to take up residence in a Scottish loch so he could get an infinite, free supply. Dumbles later moved the squid to Hogwarts lake when he took up residence here."

"Is that all?" Hermione blinked. It didn't sound like much.

"Is that ALL?!" Harry boggled. "Do you have any IDEA how lucrative the ink market has been for that family?! First, consider how many people USE ink! It is the lifeblood of bureaucracy! Every government memo, all the records they keep, every notice sent or... EVERYTHING government does involves ink!! And that's not even the lion's share of it! Every Daily Prophet issued, all of the books printed, all the TEXTBOOKS students use! Not to mention the essays they write, or the gradebooks teachers keep! Education uses almost more ink than government! Hogwarts and the Ministry BOTH are practically making him a mint!! We use a COLOSSAL amount of ink and he supplies it ALL!!"

He rounded on her, eyes afire. "And then consider the other end, production costs! Albus' grandfather got the Ministry to set and freeze the price of his product at the time they issued the monopoly, based on the costs it took to manufacture ink by the old way. Then he went and did an end run around that method of production by going and milking a squid. It costs him NOTHING to produce that product! NOTHING AT ALL!! There's no machinery, no workers to pay off, no herbs or minerals to gather. NOTHING! He keeps a squid in a lake and it lives off the fish there. Then he makes it fill up a few barrels every time he needs some. That's it! So EVERYTHING we pay for ink is profit!"

He calmed down a bit, then stated. "Just think about it. Gilderoy Lockhart got obscenely rich selling books about his exploits. But every book printed cost him money to create, and that took a chunk out of those profits. Albus got a chunk of that money, because all the ink used was his. But he doesn't have to pay anything to create it, just milk a squid. He might just as well be taxing all of the printing, writing

or drawing going on in the magical world! He not only got a share out of Lockhart's profits, but EVERYONE ELSE'S!!"

Hermione brought herself to heel after reeling in shock. "Oh. So you say all the old families sought to control something?"

"That's been true in every aristocracy. Why?" Luna asked.

The brunette eyed her fiancé's betrothed. "Well, I was just wondering what the Black and Potter families controlled. That's all. And I suppose the Malfoy and Lovegood families as well. After all, it is going to matter to us someday."

Luna nodded calmly. "You're right. The Potters controlled farms, only food sales were not an exclusive monopoly but a shared one one they controlled along with a handful of other families; and their production costs were so close to their sale costs that it never really made them rich. But the Potters have since lost that concession to Dumbledore, who stole it from Harry while he was being beaten at Durzkan." "

"That's terrible!"

"Yeah? So what else is new?" Harry winced at her incoming glare. "Sorry."

Luna smiled. "The Blacks controlled certain mines, most of which have since played out, and thus we get their recent financial decline. Also, before the ban on private ownership of dragons, they had a rather large ranch for them, but that has been defunct for some time, although its loss did contribute to their loss of status and eventual decline."

Harry himself contributed. "The Malfoys controlled, among other things, the import and distribution of erumpent fluid; not something there was any great degree of call for, so it was only a side interest for them. The public reason for our alliance is that erumpent fluid blasts like nothing else, so with a ready supply of it available at discount the Blacks could reopen some of their more valuable mines, which otherwise had too low a payout to be profitable."

"The public reason?" Hermione questioned, knowing better than to accept at face value something Harry prefaced with something like that.

Luna and Harry both smiled. She was learning fast.

Luna offered first, "Both families kept many secrets. For generations there have been rumors the Malfoys controlled a secret and very illegal dragon preserve, and what better place to hide dragons than the way goblins hide theirs in downtown London? Played out mines are nothing but big caves and tunnel networks underground. So it would've been simple for both families to work together and expand that secret dragon farm tenfold by opening up breeding areas in old played out Black Family mines. Both then could've raked in more profits."

"I suppose that sounds logical," the brunette allowed, though she showed some distaste for the skullduggery involved.

Harry tossed her a grin. "Anyway, it had to involve some deep and ugly secret neither family wanted to get out, otherwise they never would've put down the punishments for breaking faith with each other they did. Frankly, even if I knew more I couldn't tell you, in spite of being engaged to you. It would be against the secrecy oaths of each family to do so. All we can do is repeat some rumors that are already out there."

Hermione glared at him severely. "You know, Luna has alluded to those punishments several times, always calling them 'dire' or 'terrible', and now here you are doing it as well. What exactly happens if those families were to break faith with each other?"

Harry returned her gaze soberly, and said in level tones, "All members of each family would be publicly filled with erumpent fluid, and detonated."

"EEEE!!"

"We take secrecy vows so no one reveals anything by accidental or careless statements," Luna reassured her. "There are many such oaths available, ranging all the way up to Unbreakable Oaths. But as the current Heads of both families, Harry and I were going to tone down the repercussions a bit."

"Make them something approaching sane," Harry agreed, before acquiring a grin. "After all, as I've got all those special exemptions and hereditary licenses, even if the rumors were true and we DID hide a secret preserve, the dragons on it are no longer illegal! I own them, and can own any number of magical creatures I like, including dragons."

"So dire punishments no longer seem required," Luna agreed.

"By the way, not to change the subject but before we get too far off topic and forget what we are here for, what does the Queen's note say?" Harry inquired, starting once again to gather ingredients to restart the fire protection ritual.

Luna handed it to him. It didn't take long to read it, and so he handed it off to Hermione, who'd been trying to read it over his shoulder.

"So, we've got one year from the time the task to fetch Trelawney was to have expired, the Winter Solstice, to perform the ritual to free Fawkes from Dumbledore. That's it?"

"It's not like we weren't going to do it anyway." Harry shrugged, going back to his work. "Would you rather have something harder, or that we didn't want to do?"

Hermione sighed. "No, I suppose I do prefer easy assignments on a matter like this, with our lives on the line and all." Then she perked up. "And it's not like I don't appreciate being ahead on my work. It's just... I'd hoped to have more of an idea of what we were going to do after this gets done, is all."

"Well," Harry smiled but kept his eyes on his work, dosing each of his three dragons with more Continual Flame potions. They'd had a couple hours of rest, after all. Hmm, he might have to turn them back

with him a day or so next time, though, as he didn't want to exhaust them. "Think of it from the broad point of view, the overall picture. What did the Queen say, ultimately, we are to do?"

"Save her children, the fairies, from extinction," Hermione answered primly, bringing him a bowl as he moved on to collect more salamander blood.

"And they mostly died out around four hundred years ago shortly after the Time Turner got invented, right?" he asked, already knowing the answer, so he went on without response. "So it seems clear that at some point we can expect to be making a visit to that era, when the extinction began, as that would seem the appropriate time to stop the extinction - before it happens."

Hermione sucked in her lower lip. "We'd better do some research."

"It could help if we knew how to fit into that period," Harry nodded. "But the castle has plenty of ghosts who could help coach us, if we asked."

Hermione grew very thoughtful for a moment.

"Harry, what did you mean when you said that no one had ever done the ritual this way before? Surely you didn't know of your mistakes ahead of time?"

He smiled at her. "Think about it. I already told you the clues. No? Well then let me illuminate it for you. Fire Crabs are native to Fiji. The Goblet of Fire is an ancient artifact of Britain. Back when it was in use (I won't say common because to use it was rare even back then) populations were localized. Even wizards did not have much traffic outside of their own countries. So getting something from Fiji was out of the question. They'd never heard of the place, much less what they could get from there. So no fire crab shells were used. Does that answer your question?"

"Not quite. I was hoping you could explain further, like what does a fire crab shell do that makes them so valuable?" the delightful bookworm pressed.

He answered with a grin. "They are so highly prized because they multiply the power of potion brewing or rituals several times over, like a magnifying glass focuses light and amplifies its power. The ingredients for one dose of potion will instead yield four or five, or sometimes even a dozen effective uses - A real cost saver no matter how you measure things. And rituals? The same."

He shrugged casually. "You know how much trouble we went through. Can you imagine how difficult this ritual was to perform way back when? Consider for a moment what it was like before that stone circle we used. Summer solstice only occurs one day every year, and there are three separate stages to go through that all require that light for one full day. So it would've taken them three years to perform this ritual instead of less than half a week. Then there were all those precious ingredients we used. It still does cost a fortune to perform but at least we had a fire crab cauldron, so all three of us got to participate using one set of mixtures and ingredients instead of paying that cost three times. Loads of little amplifiers like those also got us to where we could include those rolls of materials to wear after we got fireproofed. They didn't have that luxury way back when. So our ritual was different."

"So... what did they do? Just run around naked?" she puzzled.

"Well... yes. For fights anyways." The boy smiled, shocking his friend by this frank response. "Cloth is one of those things barbarians don't have much of. No sense in burning up perfectly good outfits when you didn't have to. So they ran naked into combat with each other. That's what they invented war paint for."

"Now I know you're pulling my leg." The bookworm frowned.

"No, Hermione, he is being perfectly serious." Luna reflected, "Wode is a muggle imitation of magical war paint worn by our wizard forbearers and which protected them like armor. It's only weakness was against iron, which was a drawback when facing Imperial Roman Legions. But magical warpaint is wonderfully effective against stone or bronze age weapons, and even most spells. It actually provides very good protection against most spells in use at the time, and would

not burn away like cloth or leather would when hit by a fiery hex. They used what they had, and it all made sense at the time."

"Oh," Hermione acknowledged softly.

"Fire crab shells aren't the only magical amplifiers around," Harry informed her softly. "There was another rather famous one in use on these very isles. Often referred to as Dagda's Cauldron, or the Cauldron of Plenty, it had the rather amazing power of multiplying by a hundred times what the ingredients it was supplied with would normally produce. So, if you cook food enough for one person you could instead feed a hundred."

"So why didn't they use that in these rituals?" she puzzled, confused again.

Harry and Luna looked at each other, and he answered.

"Because the elemental affinities are all wrong to do that. For the ritual we just used fire symbolism is extremely important. But the Cauldron of Plenty is strongly tied to the harvest, and is an extremely powerful Earth symbol. You'd mess yourself up rather badly if you tried to mix them in something that required purity of either. Like putting roller skates on a snake or a heavy ship anchor on a light airplane, the 'addition' actually adds nothing; It only takes away capabilities. At best it simply would've gone nowhere."

Luna chimed in, "The Cauldron of Plenty, or Earth Cauldron, was used to mix up vast batches of magical war paint in times of war - just as it was used to provide huge amounts of food in times of famine. Then the druid caretakers turned to human sacrifice, and they corrupted that artifact into the Black Cauldron, or Cauldron of Blood, which was used to animate large numbers of zombies out of human corpses. What had been a marvelous artifact for the benefit and use of man got turned into a terror weapon."

"Zombies actually cost a great deal of effort and expense to animate most of the time," Harry allowed. "Which is why you don't see more of them used. But the corrupted Earth Cauldron was able to provide them almost free. You slid in a human body, and without any effort or

spellcasting at all, one zombie crawled out ready to obey the commands of its maker. Voldemort had found and used the corrupted Earth Cauldron to terrifying effect in the last war, providing hundreds of zombies for his minions to use as shock troops."

"That's horrible!" Hermione was outraged. "How could they do such a thing?"

"Technically, or morally speaking?" he asked with a prankster grin.

"Both." She returned him a flat stare.

"Technically it was not so hard as you may suppose," Harry considered. "The symbolism for Earth is very strong both for the harvest and the grave, and Dark magic is often able to corrupt things by exposure to its evil influence. That's why it's forbidden. So, those fallen druids used the cauldron in enough of their dark rituals, making forbidden potions, serving as the focal point of so many rituals involving blood and human sacrifice, and so on, that gradually it stopped being useful for anything else and began to acquire new powers to replace the old, like doing the whole zombie animation deal without ritual or components. Morally? Well, they were after quick and easy power. That's excuse enough for those who are after either."

"That's so sad. Something so useful being turned into something so evil!" The Granger girl shook her head in remorse over that tragic loss.

"Well, all is not yet lost," Harry teased, growing amused. "You forget. What is dirty can often be cleansed. Fire has a very purifying aspect to it. If we could somehow lay hold upon this cauldron, and by the way it was seized from Voldemort's forces after he'd lost the last war and put under guard in the Department of Mysteries to be researched, then it is possible - just possible mind you, not guaranteed, that we could use the Goblet of Fire to purify it."

"Do you think we could petition to try?" Hermione bounced gladly.

Harry shook his own head sadly. "No. I'm sorry. But that would only draw attention to the fact that I've already stolen it."

He produced out of his moke-skin pouch a rather large black iron cauldron.

"HARRY!" Hermione shrieked at the nature of this outrage while behind her Luna's eyes bulged and she had to fight off giggles.

He put his finger over her mouth. "Hold for a second, Hermione. Point One, they had no legal right to it, save for the right of conquest, and as the one to actually defeat Voldemort that right belongs to me more than it ever did to them. Point the Second, recall what we'd said earlier about Unspeakables. They didn't actually plan to do any research on it."

Seeing her eyes widen in shock, he shook his head sadly and added, "They almost never do with artifacts that fall into their possession. They have low numbers of Unspeakables, and most are on assignments that have nothing to do with research. This was so far down the pile on that list they never could have gotten to it in a thousand years, and by that time virtually everything known about it now would've been forgotten again. So all we are doing on that point is preventing them from sliding backwards in knowledge of this object."

He shot her a wide grin.

"So effectively we've already done more research on this than they will ever do, even if they did continue to hold it in their possession; and thus we are more suited than they on that point as well. Point the Third, the Ministry has never yet authorized experimentation on an ancient object, so even if they did get a few theories about how to restore it to its previous powers they'd never use them. We might actually fix this device. But even if our initial experiments fail we can always send it to the dwarves, who forged it in the first place, and pay their price to have them melt it down and reforge it as it once was. We just hope to find an easier, less extreme method, that's all."

"Dwarves do not part with treasures easily." Luna was nodding. "The cost of doing it that way would be extreme. Barnfulls of gold, at the very least."

Hermione spent a moment trying to even imagine such a sum.

"As it stands today, this," Harry gestured to the twenty gallon iron cauldron he was still holding up by its wire handle, "the Cauldron of Blood, is one of the most terribly evil magical objects in Britain. Left to the Ministry it would stay that way forever. Cured of its corruption it could once again be one of the most beneficial magical objects ever created. Which would you choose?"

"I'll do some research in the library," Hermione volunteered rather quickly. "I know there have got to be purifying rituals in there, and if not there's always the Restricted Section. Do you think we'll find one powerful enough? If not I could send for more books. I have a hard time imagining barnfulls of gold. But you're right, we can't let an object that valuable languish as it is. By the way, what makes you think the Goblet could cure it?"

Pleased to have her on board so thoroughly, Harry laughed in relief. "Because they are part of a set, that's why!"

"Hermione," he explained, seeing her shocked look again. "Elements come in four by nature. Nature magic reflects natural law. Nature magic created this device. So even entirely without meaning to other nature mages would have been drawn to create other embodiments of their elements to match it. One of the oddest forms of magical symmetry, but there you have it, it exists. There was a cup or cauldron or fountain like object created for each of the four elements, enchanted at roughly the same time by entirely different people who had no idea what the others were up to. The objects all have very different powers, but that's very elemental, too."

"So, a Goblet of Fire and a Cauldron of Plenty," the bushy haired genius mused, before blurting out the obvious question. "What were the other two? The ones for Air and Water, I mean?"

"No one knows," Harry spread his hands helplessly.

"We know they existed, but legends on them contradict each other," Luna provided, then frowned. "A result of bards more interested in livening up a story than telling true tales, I imagine. They wanted a

king or lord to seem great, they described him as having great artifacts. And if they'd never seen those artifacts, they made up descriptions. It's maddening, in a way. There's so much we could know, if only they'd stuck to honest reporting!"

"Of course, that was the condition of this cauldron as well," Harry admitted. "Lost to contradictory legends and whatnot. Voldemort had time and power enough, he was able to track down all of the dead end leads until he found a real one and actually recovered the thing. But that kind of work takes years at best, and tons of exhaustive research."

Naturally, he did not admit Voldemort had been tracking a number of ancient lost artifacts that way, and even found a few, but he'd made progress on quite a number of them. Of course, having found one as grand as the Black Cauldron he hadn't felt a need for any others, so gone active as a dark lord. After that he no longer had the time available that he'd needed to pursue a proper search for additional artifacts.

But Harry had all of the skills and habits needed to perform a proper search, and Voldemort had even done most of the work tracking down some others.

Hermione was having a thoughtful moment. "Harry, does the Earth Cauldron do any funky rituals like the Goblet of Fire?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like the whole fire-immunity thing. Can the Cauldron of Plenty do anything like that?"

Slowly, he shook his head. "None that I am aware of, which doesn't mean that it doesn't, only that I am not aware of any such uses."

Here it was a thoughtful Luna who supplied, "Of course, since the Cauldron of Plenty had been corrupted into the Cauldron of Blood, it has effectively been lost far longer than the corrupt version. So naturally, accurate information concerning the uncorrupted cauldron's powers is far harder to come by."

The blonde girl closed her eyes and quoted. "History becomes legend. Legend becomes myth, and that things that should not be forgotten are lost."

Harry and Hermione both blinked. Hermione's face scrunched up in thought. "I know that sounds familiar. Wait a moment, I'll come up with where I heard that before."

"Oh, it was from my first History of Magic class," Luna erupted cheerfully. "I skipped all last year, like most Ravenclaws eventually do. That's the reason we test so well in that course, we never bother to listen to the teacher and read our books instead. But this year our firsties told us how wonderful the new instructor is, so I tried her class. It was really quite remarkable. I had no idea how valuable that course could be!"

The two muggle-raised shared a somewhat guilty look.

"Myrtle's still doing that?" Harry asked.

"Is that her name?" Luna interrupted, then tried out how the new name tasted around her mouth. "Myrtle Binns. Must be some relation, since she claims to be Professor Binns, but wasn't that boring old ghost I knew of."

The other two students hurriedly sought to change the subject.

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Author's Notes:

And that should be the last chapter spent on that one, long day.

Please forgive all the exposition. Rowling just doesn't bother to explain anything, from their culture, economy or government, to the devices and systems of magic used.

We only get to explore the feelings of people who are miserable. Not my cup of tea.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

by Lionheart

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It felt almost odd to be back at school, attending a normal schedule.

In the interests of retaining a semblance of normalcy, before heading down for breakfast Harry sent off a letter to Molly Weasley, matron of kitchens, inquiring about book recommendations she could make concerning cooking and housekeeping charms and spells. He'd written it like he'd wanted gift ideas for a witch he took care not to name, so she could think it might be anybody: her, Hermione, or any other person. Hopefully that would draw out the widest range of good books on the subject.

He would then buy them all, giving a few out as gifts to witches, but keeping a complete set for himself, as housekeeping the muggle way was difficult labor and he wanted to know how it got done magically.

Voldemort, naturally, had always relied upon borrowed House Elves he'd been able to charm out of people. "Just send it over to my apartment for a few hours during the day, when you won't miss it," and all.

This was part of Harry's ongoing campaign to appear as harmless as possible before Dumbledore's scrutiny. Learning stuff like this did not appear on any Dark Lord's agenda.

What potential Dark Lord would be interested in charming his own cheese? Or in spells to enchant dish scrubbers to work on their own? Voldemort hadn't been. So, by investigating such simple spells, Harry appeared more innocent.

And he knew Dumbledore intercepted and read his mail.

For that matter, before going to bed last night he'd tasked both his fiancées with mingling out among the girls of their Houses asking about personal care and beauty charms - not because they had any

special need for them. No, they actually had less use for beauty charms than most, being already gorgeous in his opinion.

But it was a normal looking thing to do.

Looking normal left many of their other activities outside of closer scrutiny, and that was important for any number of ongoing operations. For example, they had put a large number of dryads on to boil, and that was something not too far into the forest, so Dumbledore could easily find it if he went looking.

Although, when Trelawney had shown up for the ritual, she'd gone spacy for a moment, then warned the trio about the Headmaster wanting to collect their Time Turners when they got back to school.

So they'd hidden their real ones, caching them outside of the castle, fitted the originals Dumbledore had given them with new glass, filling them up with an approximation of fairy dust using sand and fine muggle glitter. The fairy energies on the gold parts were enough to conceal the change, as those gold parts had been through quite a lot with them.

First thing to happen as they stepped back into the castle had indeed been

Dumbledore calling the two students he'd loaned those to to his office almost the first moment they'd entered the doors. And the first item on his agenda was to ask, with twinkling eyes, for those devices to be returned - explaining their class schedules had been altered so they no longer had need of them.

Prepared ahead of time, neither student objected. But Harry made certain to stumble when handing them over, smashing both his and Hermione's glass bits all over again, freshly wrecking both newly 'repaired' magical objects.

The Headmaster had winced most powerfully when, in an effort to 'help', Hermione had vanished all of the dust and broken glass bits.

As the duo had rushed off to their beds, Dumbledore had waited until both students were out of his office before he cast a spell over both

shattered hourglasses, confirming they had once been Time Turners. Then he cast a little known spell, causing both devices to show what and when they had been used for. He was particularly interested in the case of what happened to his pet oracle, and though he didn't suspect the two third years of being minions of Colonel Sanders, it was always best to be sure.

The intrusion agents had used their faces, after all.

However, the Time Turners' records checked out exactly, having performed only the repeating schedule that had been approved by Minerva.

Bad luck on his part, but the students had been using stolen devices for all of the non-approved temporal activities they'd performed. They'd been forced to use stolen Time Turners for the extra stuff, as the ones given to them by the Headmaster had been ruined by the ritual before they'd gone to do those illegal things. Still, the Headmaster didn't know that, nor did he need to.

It had been his plan to reclaim the Time Turners he'd loaned out as a way of getting replacements for his own use. He'd lost his along with the rest of his silvery devices. The Ministry, alas, had run out, so he'd thought to get caught up on his information backlog by correcting the class schedule so students no longer needed time travel (something that had originally been arranged to separate Harry from Miss Granger, to a degree, by forcing them to different class schedules - a plot that no longer had any purpose as it had failed to achieve its point) and reclaiming the devices lent to them.

An act foiled, to all appearances, by the careless accident of Harry tripping over his own feet and smashing what were, as far as Dumbledore could discern, the last two Time Turners in England.

A few more probably existed out there somewhere, but tracking down ones hidden from the Ministry for so long would be a nightmare, and possibly not worth the effort. Getting some from another country would be nigh unto impossible, as each magical nation held them as strategic national resources.

Still, it was something he could put Mundungous Fletcher on. The shifty little criminal could find most things he wanted if the price went high enough. Even so, a search of the illegal markets could well take months, and whoever had one of the precious devices would be unlikely to part with it for anything less precious in return - especially since the price of a functioning Time Turner had just skyrocketed, as supply had never come anywhere close to demand, but now most of those had vanished or been destroyed.

Thinking upon it in those terms, Dumbledore resolved that it might be easier to get a few of his shadier acquaintances together and generously allow them to go fairy hunting in the Forbidden Forest. They'd leave a few hundred dead, which Hagrid could then collect. The trusting giant would then take them before Dumbledore, who could promise to dispose of them respectfully, and once the funeral was over and Hagrid had departed the scene, dig them up again to harvest all their wings.

Yes, that might be the best strategy, as that would leave Albus Dumbledore in possession of a totally untracked and unknown Time Turner or two, when no one else ought to have any.

Yes, the Headmaster felt that might be a very good plan indeed.

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"Are you two doing alright?" Hermione asked, coming up to the breakfast table. Luna was eating while Harry was buried in paperwork.

Luna smiled serenely as the older girl joined them. "Just fine. Harry was nice enough to help me open my mail."

Hermione looked across the table at the stacks around Harry. Finally she noticed one open letter by Luna. "How many have you opened?"

"Three."

"And how many has Harry opened?"

"All the rest." Luna gave a smirk to indicate that was the whole point.

Harry exhaled loudly, frustrated by the stupidity of the various post writers, and passed a hefty stack of sorted letters to Luna. "The Ministry sends its congratulations to the new Head of the Malfoy family, along with a stack of correspondence from various Ministry officials trying to ask in very subtle ways if their bribes are going to continue. They try to disguise them as condolences about the loss of your uncle, but the veneer is pretty thin."

Hermione considered the self-congratulatory blonde seated beside her. "It's going to feel odd calling you Malfoy, when I've always associated that name with a completely different blond."

"Oh, don't worry," Luna snickered. "I've already sent the paperwork to the Ministry alerting them that, as the new Head of House, I feel recent actions performed by the last Head had left an air of disgrace to the name, and that to redeem our family from that image we'll be reverting to the name of a line the Malfoys had long since absorbed and consumed - The Darlings."

"As in Wendy Moira Angela Darling?" Hermione lifted both eyebrows.

"One of her brothers married into the Malfoy line, so I am related down both family trees. Purebloods have been marrying close for ages now." The blonde primly clipped, as though she had no other motives at all than what she'd said.

Harry smirked. "I think you just want to force the teachers to call you Miss Lovegood Darling. Or would that be Darling Lovegood?"

Hermione's eyes bugged, then she exploded into giggles.

Luna remained calmly serene. "Yes. That thought had crossed my mind."

"So..." Harry asked, smirk still very much in place, "When someone shouts across the common room, 'Hey Darling' they'll always mean you?"

A smile forced its way across Luna's features, and she began nodding. "That may be fun enough to cause me to allow the Lovegood name to fall into a brief decline, and not use it while I'm at school. I am Clan Head of the Darlings, but my father still heads the Lovegood family."

"But of course you'll want your boyfriend to call you that name most of all," Hermione snickered. "Will you go out with me, Darling?" she asked in her best Harry voice, which wasn't very good.

Luna snickered also. "And can't you see the teachers' faces when I raise my hand in class? They always call, 'Yes, Potter?' or 'Yes, Black?'. Won't it be fun watching them fall over themselves trying not to call me, 'Yes, Darling?'"

"Yes, Darling," Harry nodded, his face serious but his eyes laughing.

"Get used to saying that," both girls joked. Then Hermione sighed. "Aw! Now I wish I had a fun last name like yours!"

Any further attempts to build on this joke were called to a halt by a flotilla of post owls arriving with the day's papers. Harry showed enough eagerness to read his the girls shared a look and followed suit, opening up their own editions to see the day's headline: Dumbledore the Villain?

That promised to be a juicy article, so they all eagerly lapped it up, and the front page story did not disappoint. Trelawney's prophecy was a sub banner below the actual headline, followed closely by Skeeter's piece detailing step by step and move by move exactly how Dumbledore had arranged to put Harry BACK under the care of the Dursleys - along with a small report on that blatantly illegal vote he'd won supporting his outright abuse of power.

It was very nicely written for a character assassination piece, with tons of gritty details and dark plots exposed. It told a lurid tale of backroom politics, misuse of power and illegal shenanigans all aimed as attacks in some kind of secret war against the Boy Who Lived, orchestrated by none other than the wizarding world's most beloved and trusted figure: Headmaster Dumbledore.

Rita hadn't even had to invent anything to get a beautiful piece of shocking expose, ripping the Supreme Mugwump's image to shreds.

Harry folded his paper away, inwardly resolving to have it framed. He'd have to send Miss Skeeter a nice thank you present, as he couldn't have written a better piece of Dumbledore thrashing himself.

What raised almost more eyebrows was the full page advertisement on the facing page for Snape's Magical Pimping Service, with a wizarding photograph of Snape attempting to smile (badly) above polyjuice prices and a complete list of available hairs - including a startling number of prominent purebloods, past and current members of Slytherin House.

Between the shock value of those two, hardly anyone read the article about Lockhart being cured and hiring tutors to assist in his retraining so he could reach a full recovery.

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Dumbledore was enraged!

His anger went beyond all rational description.

How DARE they print such an article!? He OWNED the Daily Prophet, lock, stock and barrel!! They were NEVER to print anything without his approval! Why else had he started that paper in the first place, then taken care to drive all other wizarding presses out of business?

He had long ago taken heed of a phrase even older than he was, "Never start an argument with a man who buys ink by the barrel," and, once what it meant had been explained to him, had become keen to hold such a power, so gave himself a monopoly over the wizarding media.

Thanks to Dumbledore, in the United Kingdom it was illegal to buy, sell, give or trade a magical printing press. The Lovegoods, damn their eyes, had made their own. But they made small use of it. Printing a ridiculous paper made of lies actually made his own Daily

Prophet far more respectable by comparison, so he allowed them to continue with it.

Otherwise he could've driven them out of business, like he had countless others, by simply shutting off their supply of ink. It was illegal to buy ink from anybody but him, so it was a near ultimate deterrent to free press.

No textbooks were printed that he disapproved of, no novels whose themes he disagreed with, and CERTAINLY no papers who printed articles against him!

Not when he hadn't orchestrated those attacks on himself, anyway. It was always a good idea, from time to time, to make himself an innocent victim of persecution so he could rise above it and be revealed as right all along. But this was going too far! And the timing was all WRONG!

Nor should they have touched on what was said in that article in any case. It gave a disturbing insight into the truth, and the truth was something he could not let the magical world have - Ever.

Part of the reason he enjoyed nearly unanimous support was that he'd duped all the magical world so they imagined that serving Dumbledore's cause ALSO supported Harry Potter, that the interests of each were one and the same. He'd been deliberately building that impression for over a decade, and would NOT have it sacrificed so some ninny could sell a few papers!!

Adding the Boy-Who-Lived's popularity and influence to his own so he could wield BOTH, as was his rightful due, had taken considerable effort on his part, convincing countless people that he enjoyed the boy's full confidence and favor, that Harry's quiet, unassuming voice could always be heard there in the background supporting his, Dumbledore's, every choice, and that every decision the Headmaster made was made with the considerations of the Boy-Who-Lived in mind.

Doing so across those years he and Harry had no contact had taken genius, and he was proud of himself for accomplishing it. He'd

effectively DOUBLED his own influence and power by presenting himself as Harry's AGENT! That the voice of one truly represented the opinions and choices of the other.

No one could be permitted to learn the truth, that in reality those interests ran directly contrary to each other, that everything Dumbledore did where Harry was concerned was aimed towards the boy's destruction, and that Albus would oppose anything Harry wanted just because he wanted it. That boy had to be CRUSHED!!

But he couldn't afford to get caught doing it, both for the prophecy about falling to the same wound he dealt him, but also for political reasons. Albus now held more power than he'd ever achieved before, and no small part of that was due to his being seen as Harry's voice in the world of politics. For anyone to see the truth could cripple his influence and restrict his power.

In Dumbledore's ideal world, Harry would suffer miserably and die quietly without ever knowing what influence he'd wielded, or how much of that Albus had been using, telling people it was 'on Harry's behalf' but actually used against anything and everything that could have helped the child. And, when the boy was inevitably destroyed, it was Dumbledore's intention to have been seen as his trusted confidant for so long that he would inherit what was left of Harry's political influence and power - which promised to be considerable, especially if he could get him to martyr himself against another Dark Lord.

But for that to happen, everyone had to believe Harry and Dumbledore were close confidants and trusted friends who fully believed in each other's principles and goals. The Headmaster had tirelessly been laying groundwork for this in certain rarefied realms and political circles where Harry would never go, because he didn't even know they exist - nor would he.

Certain poisonous articles would NOT be allowed to get in the way!

Dumbledore rushed off to his office in a towering fury, intending to floo over to those offices and take out his rage on certain members of

the newspaper staff, perhaps reminding them just who owned that paper by firing some of the ones responsible for this outrage!

He left in so much of a rush the Headmaster didn't even notice the Quibbler arrive behind him, featuring Luna's article about the questioning of Peter Pettigrew, containing the transcript taken by aurors at the Ministry, and drawing the obvious conclusion that Sirius Black had been framed by a Death Eater clever enough to evade capture for over a dozen years.

And that Dumbledore was at least partially complicit in sending an innocent man to Azkaban without the benefit of a trial.

Unluckily for the Headmaster, he didn't notice the article, or that the international editions of both papers had already been sent earlier that day.

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Harry had just skipped off for a minute, giving the rosewood furniture to the Weasley twins (who jokingly offered up their younger sister as payment - but he'd accepted getting Luna and Hermione on as junior brewers instead), and the girls had a chance to talk.

In Greek. They'd all taken that language lozenge early that morning, and this was an opportunity to get some practice in amongst themselves. Besides, it felt surprisingly private and personal to be talking in a language nobody at their table that they knew of could understand.

And, as girls often do, they got to discussing boys.

"I still say her behavior was sexual." Luna spoke quite frankly. "She was very clearly stating that the only wood he was allowed was the wood she gave him."

"Shh! Here comes Harry!" Hermione tried to pretend that she wasn't blushing, and too scandalized to disagree.

Unfortunately, along with him, arrived an unwelcome guest.

"Hey, guys! Whatcha doing?" Ron dropped himself in the seat next to Hermione that Harry had once occupied, right before Harry could get there. The Boy Who Lived took the seat on Hermione's other side.

"We were just discussing the Pythagorean theorem and it's relation to..." Harry ran dry and glanced aside to his best friend for help.

"The Frogs of Aristophanes," Hermione finished with a weak little shrug to Harry that she hadn't been able to think of anything better. But she'd been studying ancient Greeks at the table and that was what was in her head at the moment. Unfortunately they hadn't been mathematical Greeks. They'd been playwrights. And while with Greeks those two were far from exclusive, in this case the one hadn't been the other.

Ron didn't notice. The freckle-faced redhead was already glaring across the table where Luna was seated. "What's SHE doing here?!"

"What's she doing here?" Harry repeated, disbelieving. "She's my fiancée. Now what are YOU doing here?! I thought we weren't speaking to you!"

"Give it up, Harry. You know you'd be lost without me." Ron shrugged it off and began digging into his plate, not even caring that it had been Harry's. "I know you'd bodge it up without someone native to the wizarding world to show you what to do." The redhead gave a significant glance aside to Hermione, who steamed under the implied insult to her muggleborn status.

"Well, maybe that's what I have Luna for?" Harry smirked nastily.

Ron looked like he'd been gut-punched, eyes growing wide as he glanced up to see Luna smiling serenely at Harry. Reminded of the fact that he wasn't indispensable, the young boy chewed a second before swallowing his mouthful in a rare showing of something approaching manners. Then simply let the insult slide off his back and pretended they weren't at odds.

"We've got Defense class today. You think the teacher'll be any good?"

"Haven't met him, haven't the foggiest," Harry shrugged.

"Well, it would be hard not to improve over last year," Ron shrugged. "Bunch of Cornish pixies for our first class."

Then, as if he couldn't sustain this mediocre success in conversation any longer, Ron bent over to ask Hermione, "Are you sure I can't see your boobs?"

The resulting slap could be heard clear over to the Slytherin table.

Harry was ready to call Ron out for a formal duel then and there (where he could smack him around more brutally and longer than if he'd just started hitting him), but got interrupted by Hermione shrieking. "RONALD WEASLEY! JUST BECAUSE I LET MY FIANCE ENJOY BOYFRIEND PRIVILEGES DOES NOT MEAN I AM A SCARLET WOMAN!! HE PUT A RING ON MY FINGER!" she shouted, raising the digit in question and showing off a glittering piece of jewelry some among the purebloods were able to recognize as a Potter family relic.

An insanely valuable one.

She continued in quieter tones, but it wasn't peaceful, more like Mt. Vesuvius waiting on the verge of erupting again. "Now Ronald, why aren't you off bugging someone else?"

Ron went scurrying off like a frightened rat, winding up near his brother Percy, who favored him with a brief glance. "Why did you go stirring up that hornet's nest, Ronald?" the Head Boy inquired casually, still eating his food.

Ron settled down and began filling another plate, heaping it high with food. "Well, I figured since Harry got Hermione to put out, I should try to get some too. I've been asking all the girls of our year. No luck. So I guessed I'd just try her again. I mean, she HAS to be easy! After all, Harry got her!"

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"You look like a cat that caught the canary," Harry quipped, seeing how smug and self satisfied Hermione had become.

"Harry Potter," she told him in warning tones that got spoiled by the playful smirk playing at the corner of her lips. "I've been waiting to reclaim my reputation ever since you ruined it. And that was a perfect chance."

"Ron doesn't look convinced," he surmised, glancing down the table.

"No, but the rest of the school is," she reported smugly.

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Author's Notes:

I firmly believe that you reap what you sow (others call it karma) but JKR seemed to never have anyone get what they deserved, whether good or bad.

Nothing could have been more disappointing.

On another topic, I've been getting pressure to add Ginny Weasley to Harry's little circle and wanted to know what the rest of you thought on that matter. You ought to know, if you've read any of my other fics at all, how I feel about harems. But I resist Ginny for two reasons. One, she is the one Rowling chose for him. That's enough of a reason all on its own to reject it in my mind, as I find myself disgusted by all the canon matchups. Even the one that may have worked given a better buildup didn't because of the terrible way she handled it. I find myself rejecting all canon matchups as they were all so poorly done, and in many cases completely irrational. Many I find acutely offensive (like Ron getting Hermione - NOTHING could've bugged me more).

So I find myself opposed to ALL her matchups on general principle!

The second reason is far more substantive. I believe marriage works best between equal partners, but catching someone new up to their level would be a tricky bit of work. I could do it, even make it believable, but I might not be able to find the time for quite some while, so any new additions would be spending substantial chunks of this story trailing behind the others.

On a third and completely unrelated topic, has anyone else tried to describe why Dumbledore has Mundungous Fletcher in his Order? I mean, the guy flubs every mission he is sent on, dropping out on guard duty (among other things) to go deal with his underworld contacts, and generally being a bum - not to mention supplementing his income by stealing from other members of the Order. And his stealing that locket turned into a big problem!

So why ON EARTH would you want that guy in your secret organization? The reason I put here was that Dumbles wants him BECAUSE of, not in spite of, those underworld contacts. But has anyone else come up with a reason?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

by Lionheart

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I was uh... shocked, at the level of response to my question in the last bit. Ten times the reviews of any other chapter in this story, and the response came in overwhelmingly anti-Ginny. Something like ninety-seven percent!

There've been times before when I asked a question and gotten no response at all. Or one vote, or two. The level of this was downright overwhelming.

Thank you all!

|||

Trelawney smiled as the itch/ache of Harry owning wood that wasn't hers dropped down to manageable levels, to a minor irritation akin to an article of clothes not quite adjusted right from the 'ouch, that smarts' level of a rash.

Good. That meant he'd given up that blasted store-bought furniture at last!

She'd hoped he'd realized how important this was to her, and took it away only to dispose of it, but she hadn't been sure. Nor had she been entirely rational when she'd frisked him just after her change. Right then she had been all dryad. As her witch brain started to resurface she'd realized just what a problem she'd caused by taking away their wands. But all the dryad part of her had known was that it hurt!

Well, she could deal with a small discomfort such as this.

The newly formed dryad gazed across at the Cauldron of Blood hanging from her tree limbs. The students hadn't dared take it back into the castle with them. For one, dark arts detectors alerted the Headmaster to every vile and evil object crossing the wards - this

certainly qualified, nor did they think he'd elect to ignore this, as he did so many objects brought in by Slytherins.

Trelawney wasn't happy about it being there, but had to admit this was the safest...

Her mind went blank.

When consciousness came back, she knew what to do.

The Greeks had loved and relied on their oracles for practical things. It was no use making up convoluted riddles no one understood until they were all over. They'd wanted their predictions short and simple: Troy will not fall unless you go get the arrows of Hercules, and all that.

Actually, there had been about five or six of those 'Troy will not fall' oracular conditions, and Odysseus had accomplished every one of them.

In a similar vein, she knew what to do now. Or rather, it had come to her what HAD to be done regarding that one object. The dwarves didn't have the same ancient smithies, nor even the same smiths they'd once had. It would take them a generation or more to rebuild their civilization and skills back up to where they could reforge this cauldron.

And something important inside of her told her that would be too late.

Actually, she felt deep inside her bones that it would come far too late if left to that. Nor did she think... No. It wasn't a thought. It was a prediction. She did not feel that Harry and his friends would succeed in their efforts to cure it of its vileness themselves. Too much ancient lore had been lost for them to read of it anywhere, nor would their experiments bear fruit in time. They'd end up turning it over to the dwarves, who'd accept the commission, only not tell them how long it would take them to carry it out.

And somehow she knew that would come far too late.

But the answer was already there, inside her head. She could do this. She **MUST** do this! Trelawney could even accept the shortest road to doing this, one that she desperately wished in her deepest heart none of Harry's friends would so much as consider.

She walked calmly over to the object, even as her tree limbs lowered it to the ground. Her face was calm, her outward form resolute. The other dryads and fairy creatures, sensing in the way of the fey what she was about to do, cleared a circle around her of the appropriate size.

Her tree set the awful thing down a sufficient distance from the pond. The naiads couldn't keep it because of its strong Earth powers, but no need to tempt the dears. Then, once Trelawney the dryad reached the awful Black Cauldron, she took a deep breath, and crawled in.

She died instantly.

Fortunately, she was a dryad, so she was reborn out of her tree right away. It was one of those bits of ancient lore about the Black Cauldron: it's powers were destroyed if a living being were to climb in of their own free will, but the person would die on doing so.

Luckily, she was a dryad. She could die as many times as she liked so long as her tree was safe from danger. Even so, she could be reborn from one of its descendants, or seeds. True destruction of a dryad such as herself was virtually impossible (something she was not-so-secretly quite glad for).

But true and permanent death wasn't required to stop up the powers of the Black Cauldron, only a willing sacrifice by a sentient creature, who knew what it was going to do and the consequences thereof. Such an act 'backed up the shaft' so to speak, of it's undead animation powers. A living creature turned dead blocked up and reversed the death to undeath nature of the animation, and caused the entire mechanism to be destroyed.

This had happened at least once before, in the long ago past, but the druid caretakers of the device had simply resumed its powers after going through sufficient rituals to repair them. But it was a necessary

first step to take in the fast route to cleansing and restoring that artifact to its true powers as the Cauldron of Plenty.

To put it another way, the magic of the Earth Cauldron could be compared to a processor, and the functions that magic could be put to could be compared to a program. The processor, or potential, was the same no matter what program was running. But you couldn't run a good program and a bad one at the same time, as they were incompatible. One would crash the other.

As the Black Cauldron, it had been running a tremendously evil program. The act of sacrifice stopped that program. The druids of yore had restarted it, after some difficulty, as they enjoyed using the functions it had that way. But stopping that evil program was a prerequisite of turning the magic back to its original purpose of running the good program it was once known for, and returning that item to being the Cauldron of Plenty once more.

Due to just who and what she was, however, not only a willing sacrifice but an earth-natured nature spirit, killing her not only stopped the program it shattered the device. Destroying someone of its own nature caused the cauldron to explode, scattering bits over a small but significant area.

Fortunately, that too had been expected by the surrounding nymphs, and they and the fairies had instantly swooped in to begin a collection process, forest creatures large and small not stopping until they had every last scrap and speck of iron gathered together in a chest she'd grown for that purpose.

It was easy to tell they'd done a complete job. Not a few fairies were highly sensitive to iron, and by doing sweeps they could tell not one bit remained. Nor would any creature there knowingly conceal a trace of something that evil willingly. The naiads even threw out a chunk that had landed in their pond, and the hedge around the clearing would not permit any such objects to pass. Not only that, but the cauldron, even in fragmentary form, knew itself, and could tell, just as she could tell if her tree was alright or not, whether it was all there or not - nor did anyone stop looking until it was!

It was not quite noon. Trelawney enlisted some centaurs to help her, carrying the heavy chest (now sealed and locked) that held the Earth Cauldron fragments. Escorted by more dryads and fairies, they left the sanctuary of the hedged clearing and made an armed dash for the Clearing of Solstices and Equinoxes, where Harry and his friends had set up another ritual.

Trelawney had originally been part of that ritual not long ago, but had flashed back to her tree on receiving the revelation of what she had to do to cleanse the Earth Cauldron.

Shooing the other dryads out of the broth, Trelawney coaxed Harry's three dragons into the mixture.

Dragons, contrary to popular opinion, were not fireproof, just fire resistant. And their flames, while a part of them, had limits that had to be overcome for rituals like this one. Things like feeding them Continual Flame potions was alright for the short term, but they needed much hotter, much longer flames than that for reforging the shattered Cauldron.

Besides, these dragons were all young, and the innate fire magic bestowed by this ritual would enable them to produce much hotter, much stronger fires than even their more ancient brethren could achieve - exactly the sort of thing they'd need, if they were to aid in restoring the Earth Cauldron.

The light of noon came down, and Trelawney watched as the trio of dragons got illuminated by the transformation to creatures of inner flame - made all the more impressive because dragons already had a touch of inner flame to start with.

No sooner was that done than the dryad was orchestrating her helpers to retrieve and awaken the dragons, putting them back to work blowing flames on the Goblet of Fire.

One day. That's all it would take for their new and invigorated fire breath to get the Goblet to reach full power. The Goblet at full power would be enough to melt the fragments of the Earth Cauldron. They were already loading the bits into it now. Once that was achieved,

they could pour the melted metal out into a mold she was already making out of a giant acorn and its matching cup shaped hood.

Pressed between two layers of fireproof wood, the liquid iron would conform to that shape somewhat. Then, out of the next crop of creatures to pass through this ritual she would have a number of fire-immune dryads. With their help, and the help of their trees, they could press the metal harder than any hydraulic press, shaping it as they desired. The force of growing wood was sufficient to splinter stone or tear steel. Directed by the dryads and immune to the heat, they could forge the cooling cauldron pretty much as they pleased and restore it to its necessary shape.

Then, to quench it, they could throw the cooling cauldron into the naiad lake. The water-nymphs could not keep it, it was too strongly earth natured. But fire was not the only cleansing element. Quenched by their pond and washed by the naiads themselves, the Earth Cauldron would be completely free from the taint it had borne for the first time in many long years.

They could then plant its legs in the soil beneath her large oak and fill the cauldron with seeds, to remind its magic of the bounty of the harvest and reawaken those ancient powers long since dormant.

It would take twenty eight days in that condition, one full cycle of the moon, to truly be restored to the Cauldron of Plenty it had once been. Sadly, it would pass the fall equinox in that condition. Happily, they could return it to the Clearing of Solstices and Equinoxes where it would still be fall equinox, and there use those powers of the harvest symbol to more fully awaken the Cauldron of Plenty's powers and make them available for use.

They would succeed... only if they weren't interrupted. That thought terrified Trelawney a bit, as it stood a distinct chance of happening, and security on this was necessarily light, as they didn't have much to defend it with.

She hoped Harry returned soon.

|||

Most pictures in Hogwarts are hung head high. This is for practical reasons, as most spills, stray curses, and occasional grabs for support as people trip or fall are all done lower down, around arm level at the highest, and it preserved the paintings not to have students grabbing at them or flinging ink around from careless accidents. Hung that high, there was simply less repair work to be done on them from being around those active young lives.

But it also meant that most spying tended to ignore the floor.

This was useful if you were playing card size.

Fifty two men (actually, that included four queens, so a small number were women) snuck along the darkened Hogwarts halls between classes, checking at all the corners before rushing along to the destination, leapfrogging down stairs and avoiding stray students or Mr. Filch's cat, occasionally being forced to flatten themselves against walls as those passed.

But the big people rarely looked that low down, and even if they did the backs of the playing card men changed patterns to blend into whatever surface they touched.

Thus, invisibly, a small army of invaders made its way further down and away from the populated areas of Hogwarts, slipping under the noses of portraits and playing 'rubbish' whenever they caught sight of a ghost. The spirits of Hogwarts had long since learned to ignore the discarded trash carelessly strewn around by the living.

Thanks to the elves, garbage never stayed around long anyway.

Speaking of elves, the tiny playing card people kept a close eye out, watching for the little litter collectors all the way down. But apparently the animated playing card people's purpose kept them from being recognized as trash and drawing those housekeepers to collect them.

Finding the door they wanted, the playing card people slipped under it through the crack, then expanded to full human size on the other side.

It was one of the Greater Vaults of Hogwarts, practically impenetrable even by the standards of the day. No spell could break it, explosions or physical damage wouldn't touch it, and most creatures would be slain instantly if they tried to breach that portal.

But the cards of Wonderland were not most creatures. Being thin as paper, they could pass through the crack under the door without ever touching the enchanted wood and bringing down its ire upon themselves. Never having even touched the door, the wards across it didn't so much as note their passing.

Being foolproof really depends upon what kind of fool you're talking about.

Far from being the glittering assemblage of jewels and display cases one might expect inside such a vault, the contents actually looked more like one of those overstuffed basements that doesn't get cleaned nearly often enough. Wrapped up packages, bags sealed with string (and mighty spells), and a profusion of boxes lay all around, some piled high up near the ceiling. Bits of nearly covered furniture poked out through the mess, a mirror here, a dresser there, a bit of lamp poking up in the back...

The place looked far more like the storage room of a theater company than a high security vault.

It was a disorganized sprawl with no rhyme or reason, much like the minds of the wizards who'd been slowly but steadily filling it up over the years. Most of the items within it had been known at the time they'd been stored there, but no records had been kept, so it was one large unidentified mess.

Show a muggle a room like that and tell them something valuable is inside, and they'll go through the whole thing, pull everything out, air it out, dust it off, organize it and label it and by the time they were finished with it they'd have identified a small heap of gold and jewels, shoved everything else back inside organized by type and with containers appropriate to hold it all, then gone happily off to cash in the treasures they'd discovered.

Of course, the muggles would've had their faults as well, as the valuables in that room were worth far more than a simple stack of precious metals and gemstones. And some of the simplest things were actually worth the most.

The playing-card men that had been given to Luna by her grandmother did not care one way or another about the particulars of how others would organize this mess. Instead, they went to work like ants, collecting each and every item present and storing it away inside expanding bags they carried.

They would have this, and other, vaults underneath Hogwarts stripped bare in just a few hours.

|||

Harry wasn't sure what to think about the Defense class. On the one hand, their teacher, Remus Lupin, seemed competent. A preview of the man's mind showed that he'd been friends with Harry's parents, but nowadays was totally devoted to Dumbledore.

Harry wasn't sure how to feel about that. Okay, he knew his own parents had probably been devoted to Dumbledore. Devotion to Dumbledore was a common affliction among the wizards of their world, affecting a very large percentage of the population - more particularly among those on the Light.

That was probably the most clever bit of manipulation the Headmaster had ever performed, masquerading himself as a Leader of Light. That way, most of the people who'd naturally be opposed to him were helping him pull off his control schemes. And those who opposed him got automatically labeled as Dark, and thus would not be listened to by Light side supporters.

That had to be a rather tricky bit of chicanery, but it had paid off for him big time. "No one is more fully enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free" and all. Albus was like a criminal that had gotten himself put in charge of the police. Those who ought to be opposed to him were doing his business instead, and actively protecting him from his rivals and other enemies.

Truly a rather ingenious scheme.

However, it left Harry in a bit of a bind. He loved what little memory of his parents he had, and this man (werewolf actually, that fact was near the top of his mind at all times) had once been a close friend of theirs, but he was now actively engaged in supporting an enemy side.

Ideally, he would be able to wake Lupin up to the real facts ongoing here and convert him to be his own ally, but that was no small deal itself, due to that rather reflexive notion in folks serving Dumbledore that anyone who opposed him had to be dark or evil. Even in the best case scenario, where Harry could present evidence convincing Lupin of the problems, like with Sirius Black being innocent, the man would almost certainly run to Dumbledore straight away with that information, hoping to convince the Supreme Mugwump.

That childlike trust, the 'tell the Headmaster and he'll make it all better' reflex would not only NOT make it all better, but could get Harry exposed as a player in this game, and not just an unwitting pawn. That exposure could quickly get him killed.

Converting a friend of the family was not worth that exposure, not just yet. About the most he could do was try to point the man in the direction of the Quibbler article, but that was not a well-read magazine. Nor, to be brutally honest, was Lupin all that high priority a target just now.

Harry already had one friend of his parents, in the form of one Sirius Black. Come to think of it, on his next trip to the Ministry he ought to drop by Peter's cell and rip those experiences with his parents from the little rat's mind. That would be more complete and detailed than listening to stories.

Once Harry had already been exposed as a player in this game he could make the attempt to reclaim Lupin. Preferably once he'd torn down Dumbledore's reputation just a bit more, and collected some more convincing evidence. It was hard to say just what would work to change the man's allegiance, so the more tools the better when it came time to make the attempt.

But, for now, it was best to maintain his distance and keep his cover.

The boggart had been a good lesson in self defense. But it left Harry with another question, namely: What was he afraid of?

He couldn't think of anything at the moment.

Voldemort? No. The man was no threat at present. Besides, with the man as he was, despite having greater resources and probably the ability to defeat Harry if they fought a duel (due to the Dark Lord's willingness to use spells Harry would not), Riddle was making no progress on any of his goals, whereas Harry was.

Dumbledore was like a volcano, one that could go active at any moment. Immeasurably powerful, but one was not so much afraid of it as one was conscious of a desire to flee its range as soon as possible. The farther you got away from it, the less damage it could do to you. Also, one doesn't really think of volcanoes in terms of "How do I fight it?" It was way too big to fight. You just got out of the area, and that was Harry's plan as well.

Both men, being presently unaware of Harry's activity, were not responding to his actions effectively and so, for the moment, were like stationary objects that could be dodged around.

Harry was aware that could change on a moment's notice, but for the time being secrecy was his best friend, and so long as that illusionary cover of the inactive pawn remained, he enjoyed something close to safety. Best defense: not be there. Not being there in their minds as something to target was in most ways even better than not being there physically.

So he wasn't in a state that ought to inspire fear. Not yet at least.

Then Harry thought of those cold hands reaching for him on the train. Okay, dementors were scary. But that, again, had some distance to it. He knew how to defend himself from them. Voldemort had used those creatures during the last war, so Harry knew how to control and stay safe from them.

Contrary to popular belief, the Patronus was far from the only spell that worked on them. The Patronus only drove them away. That wasn't going to get them to stay somewhere and work for you, and the Ministry did that much. Tom Riddle did more.

Voldemort hadn't enough good in him to fashion a Patronus big enough to resemble a single puff of mist out of a teakettle, anyway. That didn't stop him from using those creatures and ordering them about.

Of course, the way the Dark Lord did it was to infuse himself with a power they recognized and respected, and that was a tremendously dark ritual - one that Harry had no intention of performing.

So perhaps learning a Patronus charm would be a good idea.

Although Neville's fear really raised an eyebrow in his mind. When a school is filled with ghosts, has been attacked by a troll, infiltrated twice in two years by the spirit of the most infamous villain of recent memory, surrounded by dark and terrifying creatures (dementors and acromantulas among them) and only just finished fighting off a basilisk and surviving the kidnapping and attempted murder of a girl from your own dorms, to have a student report that his worst fear is one of his teachers is a pathetic expression of that man's supposed teaching style.

Then, seeing the greasy haired git pass by him in the corridor after class, Harry took the opportunity and softly twitched his wand under his robes where no one could see it, while quietly whispering "Imperio" so low no one could overhear it.

Then, having read the man's mind concerning who his next class was, Harry went hunting down first year Hufflepuffs so he could cast that Auror spell for assisting new recruits in overcoming trauma for the next step in this harmless little prank.

|||

"There will be no foolish wand waving in this class," Snape swept into his classroom in his typical billow of robes, going to the front to stand behind his desk, on which he'd propositioned a bucket of lightly foaming liquid.

"Now listen class, and listen closely." Snape eyed the students as though they were about to leap off into some form of insanity any instant. "The one thing you must never do in any Potions class, is stick your head into a bucket of acid - Like this!"

With that, Snape dramatically bent himself nearly double, thrusting his head (such as it was) deep into the bucket of caustic fluid. He began screaming the instant he'd done so, as the corrosive attacked his flesh and eyes, eating them away and running into his ears and down into his nose.

The man's body thrashed spasmodically, but his head never wavered from where he'd stuck it, not until it was stripped down to bone and he fell out of the fluid as the last of his life left him, slumping against the far wall, splayed out on the floor, a grinning, brownish skull leering back at the class.

Dumbledore Obliviated them all, of course.

|||

Author's Notes:

It never really struck me before writing that bit on Neville's fear, but that is something of an extreme case, isn't it? I mean, what RATIONAL school would put a teacher in that could inspire so much fear as to overshadow all the rest of what is going in that place?

I mean, Hogwarts is practically a war zone, Neville is pretty close to the thick of it, and he's more terrified of his teacher than the stuff trying to kill him?

That does not speak well for the teacher.

Army drill sergeants may have excuse to make their students fear them, but chemistry teachers do not. In any non-crisis scenario, fear does not inspire caution. It instead leads to poor judgment and mistakes. And poor judgment is the last thing you want when dealing with anything even vaguely explosive.

And Rule Through Fear generally means you're too incompetent to rule via anything else.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

by Lionheart

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Senior Unspeakable Mulciber was cataloging damage. This was not the first time the Department of Mysteries had been broken into, and would not be the last. This burglar had made off with a few things, disorganized several more, and been clever enough to steal the self-updating catalogs out of every department so no one truly knew what had been taken. The only thing they knew for certain was that all of the Time Turners, and ingredients to make more of them, had gone missing. And the only reason they knew that was the Supreme Mugwump had come in not long ago hoping to requisition one.

The criminal to do this had a disturbingly accurate idea of what the wards they had in place could and could not do, as well. That spoke of a former (or current) Unspeakable as the perpetrator.

Well, they had a list of those, and it would not be the first time they'd had to cleanse this department of members gone nuts. Being able to do the sort of things they did to the people who wound up in the cells there had a tendency to rot morals faster than anything. The feeling was, if they could get away with doing this, why not anything?

Rules became kind of hazy for anyone who worked in here long. People had a tendency to pick up... habits, of an unsavory kind, doing the work they did.

Mulciber ought to know, as his after hours hobby he'd been a Death Eater, as was his father before him. Hobbies like that tend to get passed down in the family, and he was no exception. His own father had gone to school with the Dark Lord, whereas Mulciber Junior was a classmate of Snape and Avery and the Potters. If he'd ever bothered to get married, there ought to have been a Mulciber the Third attending Hogwarts right now.

But he had other interests. Women held no fascination for his sort, who got to do things of an unspeakable nature. Sex kind of paled after that.

Hearing a clatter down a hallway, off towards the recently emptied cells (how that had been done was something they were still working out, as the perp had bypassed all their defensive measures without triggering any alarms at all), he ignored it as part of the investigation ongoing down that way.

A grin flashed into being in mid-air behind Unspeakable Mulciber, and just as quickly vanished away, leaving only a faint afterimage of a gigantic cat.

Shortly after, there came a soft 'snicker-snack' and the keys Mulciber had been using to check the contents of a multitude of drawers in a chest fell to the ground with a clatter, only to get dismissed by other Unspeakables who were busy with their own inventory work.

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Luna was brushing her teeth in a girls' bathroom after lunch, although using orange tea to do it, when her grandmother stepped into the reflective frame and out into the bathroom, seating herself on the sink.

"How are you, Luna Darling?"

The petite Ravenclaw spat out into the next sink over, then gave her visitor a happy cry of "Gramma!" and caught her up in a hug. After a moment she giggled into her ancestor's shirt sleeve. "So, you heard about that, did you?"

"Of course!" Alice nodded. "I've had some wrackspurts looking after you for quite some time. They give me the most detailed reports."

"I thought it was the nargles?" Luna blinked, mystified.

"Oh, goodness no! Nargles make terrible reporters! Better guardians, I'd say," her grandmother replied with a laugh. "Have you never wondered why your housemates are constantly plagued by acne and flatulence?"

Luna truly respected her grandmother. Such was Alice's marvelous power that, in spite of most changes wrought by the magic of Wonderland having no effect outside that mystical area's influence, her father's mother sat there looking for all the world like a seven year old with long blonde hair, wearing an old fashioned dress.

"How have you been able to deal with the trauma?" Luna asked delicately.

By way of answer, Alice calmly took a length of pipe cleaner and matter-of-factly inserted it into one ear, pulling it through to the other side, grabbing hold of both ends, then working it vigorously back and forth.

When she'd pulled it out again, the pipe cleaner had a number of small, ugly trolls clinging to it. "Like that," Alice told her calmly.

Luna had what most might call a somewhat skewed version of reality, due in no small part to such cartoonish displays being somewhat normal around the Lovegood household. She brightened immeasurably and renewed her hug, congratulating her grandmother, "Oh! Gramma!"

After a long, comforting hug, Luna asked, "You won't forget?"

"No dear." Alice shook her head, still petting her grandchild's golden locks. "One month from yesterday, then back again. Don't worry. It all worked out just fine and you are/were very sweet about everything."

Luna sighed gratefully. "I'm so relieved!"

Alice took out of her pocket a frilly handkerchief and blew her nose in it, sending out a scurrying horde of small multicolored mice and rats, and in one case a rather confused goose in a top hat.

Having vacationed more than once in Wonderland herself as a child did not give Luna a strong grasp of the same reality everyone else was familiar with. Part of this extended to being very comfortable with insane time twisting and bizarre scenes like that one.

"Well," Alice replaced the kerchief, still perfectly clean but now a different pattern and color than before. "Is your husband alright? And are you keeping your cards busy?"

Luna nodded. "My cards are out robbing the vaults here right now, and why do you call him my husband? We aren't even married yet?"

"You forget how to serve Looking Glass cake," Alice told her primly. "You serve it before you cut it. But reversing order on something like marriage is a tad more difficult, as so many are having a honeymoon before the wedding. So I took to using married titles before instead of after, although it doesn't seem to work as much that way. Give me a while, I'll figure something out."

Luna nodded. "And your cards?"

"Are plundering the Ministry of Magic as we speak, emptying the place back into Wonderland, depriving them of countless artifacts." Alice primped her hair while staring directly away from the mirror, with her back to it.

Luna held her grandmother out at arms length and looked at her askance. "Gramma, you know what Wonderland does to those sorts of things."

Alice nodded, tossing a pinch of salt into her eye to clear it the way other people might rinse it with water. That it worked was no surprise to these two, who'd expected it to do so; although Luna knew better than to try that herself. The last time she had done so it had stung, as most would expect, and her grandmother had had to work her ear with a toilet plunger to get the salt out again - only it had emerged as a duck. "That's why I won't be keeping anything. I'm sending it all to your great-aunt Dorothy. OZ is just the place to keep those sorts of things, and cousin Glinda can research them for us. It would be nice to see what our family got from that place, which reminds me."

Alice drew out of the pocket on her dress a pair of ruby slippers, which she popped down and put on Luna's feet, somehow replacing the shoes she had worn there without ever having removed them. "Aunt Dorothy was foolish enough she lost these on a trip to Kansas,

but she doesn't need them now, so agreed they ought to be passed on to you. We have no idea how those fools at the Ministry got hold of them."

Luna posed in front of the mirror, examining the reflection of her new pair of shoes. Her reflection very helpfully sat back on a table that wasn't there and lifted her feet so Luna could inspect them. She did so, leaning closer to get a better look as her reflection presented them, putting person and reflection in completely separate poses that had nothing to do with one another. "They are lovely."

"Aren't they?" Alice cheerily agreed, before reaching around her granddaughter's waist and attaching a wide belt embossed with a cat motif. "I won't explain what that does, so you'll know all about it by morning."

"Thank you!" Luna agreed happily.

Alice stepped back into her mirror. "Don't forget the Lovegood family motto."

"We don't do normal," both blonde girls chorused.

"Perhaps you could tell that to my children?" Luna asked sweetly.

Alice was momentarily confused. "You haven't got any."

"Exactly."

"Ah." Alice nodded calmly. "Yes, that makes perfect sense once you explain it. Thank you for the idea. See you yesterday!"

Luna departed the bathroom as her grandmother left the frame.

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Before returning to the castle yesterday Harry had obtained for himself a dodo. Oh, he knew wizards called them diricawls, but he'd known of them by the muggle name since long before he'd come to

Hogwarts, in both lives that he could recall, so he'd stick with the more comfortable muggle name.

The reason he had acquired it was the flightless bird's tremendously useful ability to vanish in a puff of feathers and reappear elsewhere, much like a phoenix. It was this ability, along with a standard set of Owl charms modified to work on a different avian, that he hoped to use to reestablish smuggling of contraband goods and letters in and out of Hogwarts.

Not as useful as Dobby, as the bird was quite stupid and unable to follow very much in the way of instructions, but still very much untraceable; and if he could somehow arrange for the bird to carry packages, could not one of those packages be Dobby?

Getting the elf in and out of the castle could accomplish all sorts of deeds.

Ever since getting 'sacked' by Dumbledore for having disposed of his supply of phoenix ash, Dobby was no longer considered to be a servant of the school and thus able to pass more or less unnoticed through the wards. Actually the little elf had bound himself to Harry long before Dumbledore fired him, but they had neglected to tell the Headmaster that as it kept open opportunities.

Now Harry was hoping to go right back to secret correspondence.

He'd also gotten himself a large number of crups, magical working terriers bred for control of an assortment of magical vermin both above and below ground, and immediately put them to work hunting vermin around neglected-for-decades Potter properties.

One crup in particular he'd kept for himself and immediately named 'Spaz' on seeing its hyper personality, always bouncing, eager and alert.

That was perhaps a bit unfair. Because the preservation of its working ability was of highest importance to most registered breeders, crups, like the Jack Russells they so closely resembled, tended to be extremely intelligent, athletic, fearless, and vocal dogs. Harry

understood it was not uncommon for them to become moody or destructive if they were not properly stimulated and exercised, as they had a tendency to bore easily and would often create their own fun if left alone to entertain themselves.

It would be a daunting task for their owner to provide all their stimulation, but provided sufficient work to do, they were loyal and diligent dogs.

To understand the crups' temperament, one had to understand that, like the Jack Russell terriers they so resembled, they were first and foremost a "working dog". In other words, they were designed to aggressively run, chase, and flush out foxes and badgers in the great hunts of England. These traits, so passionately guarded by breeders since the 19th century, had delivered a dog that was fearless, happy, alert, confident, intelligent and lively. A dog that was ready to meet the world on a moment's notice, with high energy and drive that made them ideally suited to those tasks, and very poorly suited to sitting around houses waiting for their owners to come home.

Harry had paid extra to get trained dogs, as he did not have the time to train them himself and the properties had begun running rampant with various destructive vermin. Luckily the animals could be put to work under House Elves that Harry had also begun acquiring to look after those properties.

House Elves that were flocking to Harry in droves, recruited out of the pool that worked at Hogwarts. House Elves there almost outnumbered students, and so there'd been fierce competitions among them for who got to perform what service. Dumbledore used the bulk of them for spying, but that was not what those elves wanted to do.

So, promised good farm work, they were eager to go. Although apparently having the Founders artifacts had something to do with it, else every home in England would've been able to recruit a house elf or two out of Hogwarts. The elves were certainly eager to go, as they had almost nothing to do in proportion to the numbers that worked there.

They liked work, and didn't want to be bored. Just like the terriers.

Caring for animals wasn't as satisfying as caring for humans, but it was better than spying, so the house elves leapt at it. Also, there was a distinct and very real chance that Harry might be hiring human workers once he had the farms closer to running. So the house elves went and worked with crups.

However, marvelous as they were, crups couldn't hunt every kind of vermin, so Harry got kneazels to go get stuff that required climbing up trees.

The first step in restoring his family's possessions was simply to stop the decline, and a generous influx of crups and kneazels to work the vermin problem, and House elves to handle home care, was a definite good start. And, considering how many of those animals he had to own in order to cover all of the homes and farms and things lying neglected, Harry was considering becoming a breeder of both crups and kneazels.

Actually, not every kind of magical pest was useless, either. His lands were infested by hundreds of mokes, magical lizards able to shrink down to nothing at the approach of a predator, and made for very valuable moke-skin bags which retained that shrinking property and thus were treasured by their owners as being virtually theft-proof.

Crups couldn't hunt mokes. The excitable terriers would bark and charge and get them to vanish, but after the lizards disappeared the excitable dogs would go off to find other interests. Kneazels, on the other paw, were more patient predators who would go up to where the lizard had been and wait for it to reappear. Mokes couldn't stay shrunk forever, and they couldn't move from the place they'd shrunk down. When at last the lizards reappeared the kneazels, who'd been waiting patiently, would pounce on them and kill them.

If he asked politely for the kneazels to bring in those kills, Harry could get skins for hundreds of moke-skin bags out of the pest populations around his farms. A simple spell, useful in potions work but never taught them by Snape (although Harry noted the Slytherins used it) would separate the parts of the animal: meat, skin, bones, organs,

blood, etc, cleanly and completely. It was made and used so ingredients would be pure for mixing, not contaminated by bits of hair or blood or whatever. So the cats could enjoy the yummy bits while Harry still got those valuable skins.

Unfortunately, mokes were impossible to domesticate and raise on farms, and posed too many problems to breed in captivity, or he'd be raising those as well. He might even try it anyway, leaving a field unmolested for mokes to continue to live and breed in.

Because, you see, the rich stay rich by owning things and making their profit by having others work them. That has been the formula since the beginning of time and was no different among pureblooded wizards. That was the way the Malfoys made their money, and it was the same with the Potters.

Light or Dark, Magic or Muggle, the rich stay rich by owning properties and businesses that they then hire others to work for them.

Only Luna had been correct in stating that the Potters were only about the middle of the road in terms of wealth and history. They didn't own any of the truly ancient franchises like the dragon preserves or hot commercial property (land in Diagon Alley hadn't changed hands since the place was created, and quite a few of the older families made all their money charging rents to the businesses they lent shop space to). The Potters didn't even own a Quidditch team.

Ministry certified groves of registered wand wood trees were another one of those products that were zealously guarded by those who controlled them. In reality it hardly mattered where the trees used grew, but enough pretexts had been invented so an artificial measuring standard could be imposed, and that meant most groves that might have provided wood could be rejected, and thus limit supply of that market to a precious few, who raked in profits.

That was the way old, aristocratic, privileged elites ran things - ESPECIALLY the locking out of new interlopers who might challenge their regimes. Free markets were anathema to control freaks and hereditary upper classes. So all of Europe was sewn up in a

bewildering array of tiny, exclusive "only I can do this" areas, that overall moved at the speed of molasses; and created an economy as stagnant as the rest of magical society.

Which, if Harry was going to be staying in Europe at all, he had to find a way to make a living, as goods from outside countries were strictly controlled by those same elites to protect their own monopolies, to the point where they even had confiscatory tax rates on foreign money converted to galleons as a way to keep financial balances the way they wanted them.

British magical society was rotten to the core, and those of Europe not much better. But while he stayed there, he had to do something to earn a living.

Trade monopolies were jealously guarded amongst the old families, and it was hard to chisel out a new one. But one wasn't truly a pureblood until you did, which generally involved finding something unpopular to do, or that no one else had thought to control, and taking that over.

The Lovegood's printing press was a good example, and very recent by pureblood standards.

The Potters had, sometime in the middling past, made their trade farms and the supply of food and other comestibles to the magical public. It was hardly glamorous, and not at all the sort of thing you'd brag about at parties, nor even truly exclusive, as there were several families who shared that trade between them. But the Potters also dipped their hands into a few other enterprises, like running a Quidditch training camp, to bring them a dollop of prestige.

Other, older and more notable families had striven hard in the Wizengamot to preserve their own monopolies and kept the Potter family out of lucrative businesses like supply of potion ingredients or wand cores, and things had settled down into a more or less steady balance of trade up until the arrival of Lord Voldemort.

Things like farms are easy targets, being large and hard to defend. With the Potters a noted Light side family, burning fields, cursed

crops, and spoiled merchandise became the norm for a while, until Harry's grandparents died in trying to fight off one such raid, and that was it. James had been too busy fighting the war to see to the family businesses, so things had slipped into a steady decline that only got worse once the young father died.

Harry had not run any businesses as an abused inmate of Durzkaban, and so their share of the market of food supply to the wizarding world had fallen to other hands. To no one's surprise, those had been dark ones, as the only ones to profit from the last war had seemed to be dark families. No Light family would've robbed a Light hero when he was down anyway.

So, Harry was faced with the fact that what he owned as the Last Potter were a ton of properties that were not making him any money, and the one thing they had once supplied to wizarding markets, others now did, and there was no new demand in that area for him to supply.

Oddly enough, the Quidditch training camp still ran, not having been knocked out in the last war and running under various managers since. But in other areas he'd lost his hold, the Potter's place in the market had been taken over by a family that hadn't gone inactive due to near-extinction, and to get that place back would take a battle in the Wizengamot - one Harry didn't think he could win.

Why? Because Dumbledore had taken over that franchise himself, and now HE had monopoly on providing the magical world their food, indirectly, of course, through a network of proxies and guardianships. Having collected a piece here and a piece there, then consolidated it all, Dumbledore didn't have to share the monopoly of food production with anyone. He controlled it all, and prices had risen markedly since that had occurred.

What made that more despicable was Harry had learned that was not the only market Dumbledore had taken from his own followers.

That left Harry only one option to exploit - his newly invoked ability to keep and raise any number of magical creatures. It had been this situation with his inheritance that had provoked him more than

anything into asking for those special hereditary exemptions and perpetual licenses in the first place. As otherwise he'd have been en route to being as poor as the Weasleys.

Previously, magical creatures had been too big a franchise for any one family to have a stranglehold on. It had been one of those things where many clans had controlled tiny pieces, with tons of hard defended pockets and exploited grey areas. Even Harry didn't have a true monopoly, having come by this a very non-standard way so the Ministry didn't see what they were offering.

The magical government didn't insist that everyone go to him for all of their creature needs, like they did with many other businesses, they'd only granted him immunity to their regulation on that one thing.

Even so, they NEVER would've granted Harry anything of the sort if they'd realized the implications, as it stepped on too many dark family's toes for him to be able to raise anything he wanted, even otherwise illegal things others had to take care not to get caught at (rumors had persisted for generations that the Malfoy's had an illegal and hidden dragon preserve - and he knew from memories of Riddle reading Lucius' mind those rumors were true).

Fortunately, Harry had a lot of raw material to work with. Having run farms, his family had left him a lot of valuable land: orchards, vineyards, wide open spaces, the lot. That was plenty of space to keep a menagerie in, and once the farms got restarted, enough food to keep the animals fed so he didn't have to pay someone else to provide feed for them.

Farms can be turned into ranches fairly easily. He could raise plants to feed animals, and more plants to feed to pigs, sheep, goats, cows and so on he could feed to meat-eating animals, and thus save himself a fortune on costs to run his little creature collection.

It's just, what the law can give the law can also take away, so he wanted to be far away from England and Dumbledore's seat of power when he started this, otherwise he'd lose it all before he even began.

And for that, he was going to have to invest in one of those devices that can move landed property.

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Author's Notes:

I wonder. Has anyone ever written a fic before where Luna was the NORMAL one in that family? They've heard about reality, but they don't live there.

By the way, I think I bent something in my own mind when I was writing that scene between Luna and her grandmother. But I had to ask myself, 'what would a person be like having grown to old age with regular access to a place like Wonderland?' and the answer was, 'completely loony, of course!' Not because she isn't smart or even rational, she's just interacting with a form of reality no one else can interface with.

Chapter Thirty by Lionheart

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The scariest proposition I could make is that Luna's family are all perfectly sane. It's the rest of us that are loony!

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It was evening after a successful, if somewhat boring, day of classes. Their first full day without the use of Time Turners, or any exotic adventures, and Hermione sat, nibbling on the ends of her hair, with an encyclopedia in her lap.

"Whatcha reading?" Harry plopped down beside her.

Rather than summarize, she just began to read the topic aloud. "...white oak is relatively rot resistant and has a cell structure that makes it watertight, and white oak barrels are used in wine and whiskey manufacture to prevent leaking. Throughout history it has been used for construction, shipbuilding, cooperage, agricultural implements, and interior finish of houses, although woodworkers should beware that ferrous metal hardware reacts with oak, causing corrosion and staining the wood. Brass or stainless steel fittings should be used instead.

"White oak is used extensively in Japanese martial arts for some weapons such as bokken and jo. It is valued for its density, strength, resiliency and relatively low chance of splintering if broken by an impact, relative to the substantially cheaper red oak."

Having finished the article and learned what she'd wanted to know, Hermione closed the encyclopedia and went back to the shelves to replace it before returning to her own desk.

"Hurray!" Harry caroled in triumph moments later, holding up his book. "A sleepwalking spell. I've been looking for one of those, and this one just might be exactly the one I wanted!"

"Sleepwalking?" Hermione looked up out of the pile of books she was working in. Brushing hair out of her eyes, she asked, "What use is that?"

Harry bent down to study the spell he'd found in glee. "More than you'd think. And... YES! This is the spell I'd heard of! Amazing. I didn't think they had a copy in here."

"What's so different about that spell?" the bookworm inquired curiously.

Harry looked up at her from a book copied out of the Restricted Section, face beaming with joy. "It's a borderline dark curse that's been restricted by the Ministry for having far too much potential to do harm. The reason for that is that this particular spell lets you program certain actions for the sleepwalker to do, even before he falls asleep. It nearly got banned after a hag used it on a wizard to make him murder his wife in his sleep."

"That's horrible!" the girl decried.

"Yes, but horrible acts can be done with all sorts of spells. Someone healing a guy like Voldemort gets him back in action - and putting a guy like that into action causes more pain and suffering than any spell ever invented. That's not to say there aren't true Light and Dark spells - there are, but this spell is not inherently either one. It can be put to good or bad purposes, like most things in life. It's simply a tool."

Hermione brushed errant hairs out of her face again. "What good purposes could you put a spell that makes someone walk in their sleep do?"

"Sleep-workouts!" Harry cried out excitedly. "Laps around the lake, aerobics, body building... they're all boring but necessary things. So, instead of getting up a couple hours early, just do them in your sleep! The mind needs sleep a great deal more than the body, anyway, especially since what the body uses its downtime for is repair, and that can be speeded up by potions."

Hermione thought quickly about all the flabby and saggy witches and wizards she'd seen, and how much distaste she'd had for the mandatory phys ed class in school. She was a bookworm, not an athlete. Scrunching her face in disagreement, she asked, "Are you sure that it's needed?"

He nodded vigorously. "Yup! Greek wizards proved physical fitness is linked to magical power. Being overweight, underweight, sick or anything else affects your magic as much as not knowing spells."

"Then why don't more magical people do it?" she puzzled.

Harry shrugged. "Most of the same reasons more muggles don't do it - it's hard, boring, ultimately demanding work and they've got things they'd rather be doing than be out making themselves miserable on the track. But there's also another component in that for the first little while, your magic actually gets LESS as more of it gets diverted to strengthening your body. So those who don't stick with it never see an increase, so believe exercise is actually detrimental for your magical core."

He favored her with a steady gaze. "Among the few who know better... well, there are easier routes to power, ones requiring less work. Knowing more spells than the other guy is typically lots easier. Learning to use a sword properly: loads of effort. Learning a Cutting Curse: very little effort. Running long distance: loads of effort. Riding a broom: very little effort. Like that."

He shrugged. "Anyway, most people with ambition in the magical world go for political power, not personal excellence. So developing abilities with anything but a wand is massively unpopular. That's why there aren't more animagi. Anyone can do it, but few believe it's worth the effort. People are inherently lazy, most of them. But wizards seem more inclined that way than muggles."

Dreams of being unpopular in PE class, knobby legs sticking out from under baggy shorts, and always getting picked last for every team were haunting Hermione's mind just then - It wasn't always laziness that got people an aversion to sports. Just start out being bad at them

and humiliation from the jocks would set in quickly, scarring you for life.

As if reading her mind, Harry said, "That's why I want a sleepwalking spell to do it. So long as our bodies go through the motions, we'll get the benefits. I frankly don't enjoy sports either. But there's no help for it, we've got to improve ourselves physically."

"Why is there no help for it?" she challenged, thinking she could go on in her life quite happily never having to do another pull-up again.

This time Harry drew in breath deeply, calming and centering himself, before he gave her a steady gaze. "Because we are at war, and fit soldiers survive longer than unhealthy ones."

She gave him a wry smirk. "Harry, you can't fool me. I've seen what you really look like when you're not morphed back to the way you were. Outside your 'weak little human' disguise your actual fey body is a solid mass of muscle. You're the most fit thirteen year old I've ever heard of!"

"I know," he rubbed his eyes. "But you aren't. And I care about you." Harry raised his beautiful green eyes to pierce her with his concern for her well-being. "Hermione, the military spends a great deal of time getting soldiers to run around, do push ups and sit ups and so on, because in battle you never know when you're going to have to leap over a ditch, drag a wounded comrade out of danger, break down a door, lift heavy debris off of something you've got to use, dig a trench, or any number of other physical demands."

He sighed, putting his arm around her. "Many people postulated that with the introduction of guns we wouldn't have to condition our soldiers as much, that pasty looking skinny guys could fight just as well as big buff tanned ones that made up our armies back when it was all swords and shields - but it's just not so! Because war IS chaos and chaos is navigated by being able to manipulate your environment, which is what physical conditioning allows you to do. We condition our soldiers just as much now as back when it was all swords and shields, perhaps more so now because we do it in highly organized ways."

She lifted her wand and pointed to it wordlessly, her eyes alight in laughter. Smirking, she told him, as if speaking to a child, "We are magical, Harry. We don't exactly have to lug heavy packs around. Or if we do, we can always cast featherweight charms on them."

Harry nodded soberly. "And the same kind of thing can be said of the wand instead of the gun. It'd be easy to think that magic could replace physical fitness. After all, spells can be used to cross ditches, levitate comrades, open doors or lift debris, but if you have to cast a spell to cross a ditch that slows you down, and if I or someone else was firing on you, you don't WANT to pause at the edge and speak an incantation! You want to go over that as fast as possible, if you have to cross it at all. A guy who can hurdle a fence crosses it in an instant, without breaking stride. But scrambling across will cost you time, and time is something you can't afford to lose in a battle as there is never enough of it for even the most vital things. Most of the same arguments that apply to armor apply to being physically fit as well. It saves you time and effort that you can spend to do things like kill the enemy."

He looked at her gravely. "But there's more to it than that. A strong person can take more damage than a weak one and keep on going. Part of it is being used to working out conditions you to keep on going in spite of discomfort, but also muscles are their own kind of armor. Strong, muscular tissue is several times more resilient than weak flabby stuff. So spells trying to hurt you either have to be more powerful, and thus take more time and energy to cast, or they'd end up doing less damage to you, which is why giants are so hard to hurt with most spells. A curse that might crush the ribs of an ordinary man might not do more than bruise a really fit one.

"Also, wands can be lost. Most clever duelists even focus on disarming foes as their favorite tactic. One, two, however many wands you carry, you can still lose them to accident or enemy action or whatever. So you don't want to get caught in a situation where being without one makes you helpless! If you can lose your wand and still cross that ditch, you can get out of there to come back and fight another day. Also you have to consider that disarming hexes all exert a physical force on your wand, and that physical force has limits, so

being strong might easily permit you hold onto it when an ordinary mage might lose it."

The boy grew distant, as if reviewing a memory. "People don't plan to get wounded, Hermione. It just happens. Bad things happen all the time in war - mostly because each side is trying, full time, to CAUSE them to their enemy! You don't want to get hit, or wounded, but realistically you'd better have medical support for your side anyway. This is just exactly the same. It is an emergency support to have something to fall back on in case the real easy stuff doesn't work. What happens when that door you want to open doesn't respond to an unlocking charm? The one guarding the Philosopher's Stone didn't. What happens when you haven't got a broom and anti-apparation wards go up? That's what happened to my mother when Voldemort came to kill her. What if you need to move that wounded comrade but the enemy can somehow track your magic? If we're still underage next time we get in a fight the Ministry could expel us for casting anything. There are circumstances that none of us want to be in that can restrict our options. It's best to have others we can fall back on. So in that, fitness is just like knowing medicine."

Once more he raised his eyes, though this time they were filled with sadness. "Once again, war is chaos, every kind of thing can and will happen. The more types of possibilities you can deal with the better off you are. Fitness is a form of power, no matter how useful you think it may be in relation to others it, like healing or warding or any other thing, still has a place and stuff it can do better than any other. Dumbledore may be a frightfully powerful mage but if he has to chase you around the parking lot a few times before you let him into range to cast a spell then he'll be winded and tired - and that's as good as hitting him with an inconveniencing spell or two! A man panting for air is not going to be able to speak as well for casting spells quickly or often!"

Having thought about it for a second, the girl shrugged. "Well, so long as I get to sleep through it. I suppose I'd like to become fit." It ought to help her figure, anyway, even if she couldn't see herself wrestling Death Eaters.

"Good," he returned, smiling back to her. "Because archery is a physical discipline, and you were the one to sign us all up for archery lessons with a centaur. Just so you know, the Greeks were nuts about fitness, which was why I started to look this up, and their heroes were an incredibly athletic lot. So, by signing us up with Firenze, you put us all on the path of the best of their best fitness nuts. That's not exactly a path to living a life of leisure."

"Oh no!" Hermione groaned, dropping her face into her hands.

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Luna was just finishing up her notes for Astronomy class.

The class began at midnight, one night each week, and she was always the last to finish up. Part of that was her housemates just being Ravenclaws, always competing to use the equipment. But most of it was they still had not shaken the roots of their former treatment of her, and when they weren't paying attention they slipped automatically back into old habits of shoving 'Loony Lovegood' out of the way to get things first.

She really didn't mind. Sometimes. Times like this it was an opportunity to get some more work done, and it was so peaceful after everyone else had left. As a result, she could do her work at her leisure, and take better care getting it right than the frantic-for-equipment members of her House.

Finished up at last, Luna turned from the telescope she'd been using (that she'd checked for lampblack before trusting, as some members of her House were not above little pranks like that - especially on her). Turning to face the stairs, she instead saw Draco rushing up at her with a face twisted by rage, and the next instant came a flash of light and the larger boy had shoved her. Then she was falling off the top of the tower!

Draco had pushed her off the top of the Astronomy Tower!!

Instead of flailing about and perhaps shrieking (briefly) like she'd expected, however, Luna found herself quite calmly and purposefully

flipping around to land on her feet ten stories down as naturally as anything.

It hurt. The impact hurt a lot, but nothing like the brief but searing instant of agony she'd been expecting. In all honesty, she hadn't expected to survive. But while her legs were strained and overstressed, she'd not been flattened like a pancake either, and she'd kept her feet under her the whole while.

More than her own strength and agility had been involved in that. Although she also could feel some muscle damage, tender testing confirmed it was nothing deeper, nothing Harry's potions couldn't deal with overnight.

The eyes of the lions embossed on the belt her grandmother had given her were softly glowing green, like emeralds.

Wincing, but able to walk, Luna marveled at herself for not having reacted more strongly to that. Draco had just tried to kill her! Poor fool probably felt, incorrectly, he could get his family name and fortune back if she'd died. But, at the time, she'd been too shocked, then reeling with disbelief, and now...

Now she wanted desperately to be cuddled.

Nearly being killed didn't agree with her, and the encounter reaction was just starting to catch up to her. She'd be feeling faint soon enough.

Spotting the outside of Gryffindor Tower, Luna walked up to it and began to climb, knowing somehow that she could do it almost effortlessly. It hurt less than walking, that was for sure, as she could support most of her weight on her arms (which was another thing she didn't think she could naturally do). And it gave her something to concentrate on so she didn't pass out.

No question about it. Her life had been saved by this magic belt grandmother Alice had given her. Next, she would tell Harry. And then they would kill Draco - or at least make him suffer!

She didn't want the little snake making a second attempt.

Ouch. And if he did, she was going to try and be more athletic so the next time she got assassinated by being pushed off a tower it would hurt less when she landed!

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As Harry came awake he was astonished to hear crying in Luna's soft, musical voice. The dreamy girl was usually so calm and collected in that baffling way of hers that he had trouble picturing her so upset. Then he felt her hand on his shoulder and instantly roused, ready to do battle or he didn't know what.

Luna had pulled herself along the floor, somehow he was able to tell the girl had become unable to walk, and thoughts of battle instantly took a back seat to be replaced by the casting of diagnostic charms and reaching for his bandoleer of potions and the medical ones stored within.

But the thoughts of battle didn't truly go away, and he reflexively scanned the area for dangers even while he levitated Luna up onto his bed.

"What happened?"

"Draco came up on me after my Astronomy class and pushed me off the tower," Luna winced. "Grandmother Alice gave me a belt earlier that saved my life from the fall. But landing on my feet after ten stories, even if the impact was reduced, has... AaliEeaaAH!" she gasped as he touched a sore spot, trying to arrange her legs to get her more comfortable. "Caused a bit of damage."

"It's all muscle tissue," Harry declared, having checked his diagnostic charm results against one of the medical magic books he'd been studying. "I've got the right potion for this. We can have you fine in a couple of hours."

Administering the potion came even as he explained this. She drank it eagerly - it was poppy flavored, not exactly her first choice, but

better than that swill served out to students in the Medical Wing. She gasped as the potion went to work knitting together torn muscles and her pain began to drop measurably.

Luna sighed in contentment even as Harry finished scribing a note. "What are you doing?"

Instead of answering, Harry gave the note to Spaz. The little terrier had been bouncing around barking in excitement already, fortunately he'd been put under a silencing charm so their dormmates could go to sleep. "C'mon Spaz! Take this note to Hermione, then bring her back here, ok?"

The little dog went off like a shot.

Tom Riddle had been able to make animals do what he wanted them to do without training them even before he'd gone to Hogwarts. Later this had been part of what led him to being a supreme magical creatures genius able to get more advanced beings like hags, vampires and werewolves to join him.

But Harry found it enormously useful just with animals. Spaz might not be able to bark due to the silencing charm (and he didn't dare remove it because he didn't want to wake the entire tower), but Spaz would be coming back with Hermione whether she wanted to go or not.

Useful when you were a boy that couldn't navigate the girls' staircase, but needed one of them late at night for an emergency. Owls just didn't have the same force of personality to drag a girl out of bed.

Sure enough, Hermione appeared in her nightgown, herded like a sheep by the little dog, bushy hair all awry and note clutched in one hand, to find Harry was belting on his armor and gearing up.

"What are you doing?" she asked, wiping wild hair out of her eyes as Spaz pulled on the hem of her nightgown and (presumably) growled. Seeing that its charge had reached her goal and it had achieved its assignment, Spaz let go of her gown to bounce high enough in the air to lick Harry's face.

The boy paused in his outfitting to give the dog the attention it deserved, glancing up to his friends even as he rewarded the terrier. "As I said in the note, Draco just tried to kill Luna. The bastard has to pay!"

"Yes, but he's gone back to his dorm room by now." Luna surmised. "Prying the little snake out of his Slytherin nest would alert the old Bumblebee that you aren't an easily controlled tool anymore, and getting a teacher involved would be pointless. I'm sure he's got an alibi, as he expects there to be a body found in the morning and wants to escape blame for that."

Hermione just sat down heavily on the edge of Harry's bed, not quite believing until then that someone she knew had just been subject to a murder attempt by a fellow student and finding that reality just a trifle difficult to adjust to.

"Are you suggesting I not string him up and hang the little beast with his own intestines?" Harry asked politely, pausing in strapping on his sword.

"Do what you like to him, but do it later, on a time of our choosing rather than his, so we can arrange things to our liking," Luna soothed, then sighed and went cross eyed as the relief from the potion hit her more fully.

"I find I'm too angry to not do something now," he replied in a reasonable tone of voice. "After all, I very nearly lost you - and if Dumbledore has anything to say about it, I'm sure Draco will NEVER get punished for this!"

"Then take your anger out on Dumbledore, in some fashion he won't trace back to you," Luna breathed, still cross-eyed as the potion worked on her. She blinked, eyes widening. "I saw a flash of light as Draco pushed me."

"Colin's camera," Harry nodded firmly. "I'll get it now."

The two looked at each other and grinned. Hermione sat up and began busying herself with all the same diagnostic charms Harry had cast before, taking over the role of nurse while Harry darted off to get the camera.

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Two hours of planning had allowed Luna to be somewhat functional by the time the trio were ready to implement their ideas.

Taking Colin's still stolen camera, then getting hold of their Time Turners, Harry spun them back to use their invisible clothes to get a photo of Draco pushing Luna off the tower.

That went off smoothly, although it was a touch difficult for Harry not to kill the little snake for his attempted murder immediately after taking the shot. For her part, Hermione's face paled as she watched Draco rush forward and obviously attempt to harm her friend, then firmed in determination as she came to agree with Harry. But this close under Dumbledore's thumb, they dared not risk striking back at the brat directly right away.

No, what they had in mind was much better.

Draco was a pawn. Deprived of his powerful father, great wealth, and a name from one of the currently Great Families, the boy was little more than an arrogant and shrill cheerleader of the pureblood side.

Well, and now an attempted murderer, also. So he couldn't just be ignored.

Harry on the other hand was a player, centerpiece to his growing side, and you do not risk the destruction of someone with so key a role to play taking down stray gnats. Taking Draco down directly right under Dumbledore's nose was too tricky a proposition. They had no way of knowing what Dumbledore's true information resources were, and whacking Draco just edged too close to perfect blackmail material to risk dropping into the old man's lap.

Other things the teens had gotten away with in that castle amounted to a bit of rule breaking. Outright execution of one of his students for attempted murder, while legally defensible in some ways, wasn't something to risk under the nose of a man who ignored the law at his whims.

Besides, while Draco needed to be destroyed, he wasn't the priority target here. It was Dumbledore, and the fact that he protected and supported murderers like Snape and Draco so long as they supported him.

The PROBLEM was not so much the arrogant little brat as it was those who enabled him to get away with being as bad as he was. Without authority figures to stand behind him making exceptions for him and shielding him from the consequences of his own actions, he'd destroy himself in short order.

There were laws against his sort of behavior, and if those laws could be enforced he'd be destroyed by his own actions. But so long as he had people like Dumbledore and Snape behind him, Draco could ignore those laws as they didn't apply to him - something Voldemort had promised his pawns all along, but Dumbledore actually delivered.

So, rather than do nothing to Draco, they chose to strike at his enablers. It passed the time while they waiting for a better opportunity to whack the little cretin.

The three then snuck out and floored over to the offices of the Daily Prophet, intending to alter the type so the front page of the morning's edition read: Murder Most Foul! With a picture of Draco pushing Luna off the Astronomy Tower. Hermione was all ready with the text written for a companion article, titled, 'Hogwarts Unsafe?' listing out the various catastrophes to endanger the lives of students there in recent years.

It would have been a good idea, but once in passed offices and the pressroom to the actual workshop that contained the printing press, Luna brought them to a halt.

"Harry, this isn't like my father's press."

"But can you figure out how to work it?" he asked.

"Oh, it's not that," the girl leaning on him hobbled forward and pointed out a feature on the machine that meant nothing to him. "My father's press just prints papers. This, this does something else in addition to that. Come, help me find the ink. There's something strange going on here."

"Right!" Harry nodded, and they began their search. The building was oddly well secured for a simple business, but the wards they had did not stop him. They were good enough to slow him down, however, which raised all their eyebrows, as that required an intensely intricate bit of warding work.

Few places, outside the Ministry, Gringotts, and of course Hogwarts had any better warding protection. But those places had all invested immeasurable fortunes in warding stones and runic amplifiers that could sustain the higher loads. Also wards required regular maintenance to stay strong, and the one to perform that maintenance had to have sufficient skill to cast those wards in the first place. So it was rare indeed to find any this thick on a business.

Since Harry could, and HAD bypassed the wards of Gringotts, the Ministry, and to a small extent Hogwarts when needed, this place stood no chance. But the very fact that it could pose any challenge at all was worrisome. It spoke of a very powerful and wealthy person with a personal interest in that place.

When they found the ink, they understood.

"There's a Persuasion Potion mixed in with this ink," Harry declared. "And a memory enhancer, and... I don't know what all they did to this!"

"Look at this!" Hermione declared, holding up a few of the type pieces used to print letters. "On one side, they are the letters you'd use. But the other..." she scowled. "It's a rune, one for trust and believability."

She turned to face them, scowling. "Every letter used would be connected to a rune, even though that rune never touched the paper. The text itself would be magically screaming 'Believe me!' 'Believe me!' Because of that."

"Look over here," Luna drew their attention to the bit of press machinery she'd pointed out earlier. "This stamp layers a compulsion charm onto every sheet this press prints - and this stamp is one of many! Then, over here, the press sprays a Trusted Source fixative over the pages as they come out."

The teens shared a significant glance. The printing technology of the magical world was fairly backwards. Muggles of the same day and age were using blotters and other methods to dry ink so it did not smear over a page. But wizards, as with most things, solved it magically and used magic to dry their ink quickly. Using a spray-on fixative potion was the only way to run a high-speed press like this.

"So what we've got," Harry summarized, "Is a newspaper infused with so much magic that whoever picks up a copy is going to believe whatever this rag tells them. Is that right?"

"Exactly," Luna confirmed, before hobbling over to check another bin, and showed him the device within. "And this places a mild Confundus charm over each paper as it gets folded, I'd guess so they'd choose to believe what they read in that paper over any source save personal experience. It doesn't seem powerful enough to override that... but anything less? Probably."

"But the folds are undone... Oh! I see!" Hermione declared, getting it. "When a person first gets their paper they unfold it, releasing the Confundus to affect them, so they believe this over any previous edition. But if they were to go back and reread earlier editions it would have worn off, so they would not mess up over which to believe, the older or the newer papers!"

Harry rubbed his eyes. "I'd always believed the magical world was filled by ignorant sheep for believing whatever they read in this paper. Now I find that may not be their fault. How long has this been going on?"

Luna checked a few scratches and stains on the machine before telling him, "These parts seem integral to the printing press, and the press itself has been in continual use for a long time, probably before our parents' were born. So I'd say..."

"Dumbledore." He beat her to it. "Just great. Well, that explains the wards, too. No doubt he didn't want anyone but the printing staff to know about this, and I'd guess those few guys are under heavy secrecy oaths. You can't let the magical world know you've been playing with their minds, after all."

The blonde looked him in the eye and said directly, "No. Once you'd learned to distrust this newspaper for one thing, you could learn to overcome the other compulsions. But other than that, a reader would believe whatever it said - even if it came out contradicting what it told you in earlier editions."

The girl then sat down and smiled dreamily. "No wonder the magical world is insane. The reality they believe in gets edited every day by Dumbledore."

Hermione was shaking her head. "It's too bad we couldn't use this setup with the special ink and equipment and things for creating textbooks. So long as you could make sure the information was accurate, reading your subjects in this format would let you learn them a great deal faster. Comprehension and retention are all magically enhanced by what we've found here. Every part of this seems to be designed to sink things deep into your mind."

Harry was looking over the great big rolls of muggle paper. "Well, this doesn't seem to be altered to any degree."

Luna shook her head. "Oh, no. You couldn't. Among muggles paper is cheap. But for wizards it still ranks as a luxury good. We don't have ability to mass produce it. For most writing tasks we still use parchment, and that's not for the sake of nostalgia. Paper manufacture is too heavily industrialized for us. So, when we need great quantities of it, we simply deal with muggles - and I don't need

to tell you that commercial trade for paper from muggles is a controlled monopoly."

"Dumbledore?"

"No, the Notts, actually. But he has them by the scruff of the neck as their main trade is fishing, and he controls what permits are issued each year, and also has sole say on what boats are considered seaworthy or not. So if he grew displeased with them they'd find themselves as poor as the Weasleys in short order."

Hermione was blinking. "I didn't think that wizards did much fishing."

Luna smiled softly. "Oh, we don't. But that made an excellent cover for their real trade, which is smuggling. Although I hear rumors in recent generations they've had their prices undercut by the competition and are struggling. So actual fishing now represents more of their income."

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Author's Notes:

Now I know I've read countless stories where the main character decries the entire magical world as idiots for believing everything they read in that paper. And, for the most part, I think they are right.

However, this alternate explanation just occurred to me. We get shown no end of charms, curses and potions that exert a powerful influence over a person's mind. Who is to say that can't be used by the Daily Prophet?

So, just once, I wanted to write one where the magical public are blameless, or as blameless as any other victim of magical compulsion can't be.

P.S. Yes, I know about the silver vs ruby slippers bit. I used ruby as they had more universal 'Oh! I know what that is!' factor.

Next up: Hermione gets Harry to steal the entire setup so she can print textbooks. Or not?

Chapter Thirty-One

by Lionheart

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Taking all that was around him, Harry drew in a deep breath and let it out in one gust. "Okay," he said, now that the stress was partially relieved. "This is what is going to happen: We are going to publish the most scathing paper we can, calling Dumbledore to account for all his crimes we can find out about. Then we are going to destroy this press."

"Harry!" Hermione cried, outraged.

He raised his hands to placate her. "Now hear me out! Since we can't possibly leave it intact for our enemy to continue to use, we must destroy or remove it so he can't just get the whole magical world to forget everything we've done and love him all over again."

"I favor removing it," Luna stated with a glance towards Hermione, who relaxed from her apprehensions upon her saying so, and she followed that up with a fond smile. "Because Hermione would never stop grieving otherwise."

The bookworm pretended outrage, but was seriously happy.

Harry reflected that happiness right back at her. "It does raise our risks, as there is a chance he could trace it to get it back from us, but ok. Before we tuck this into our pockets, however, we do want to issue one last paper, one that will hurt Dumbledore as much as we possibly can."

"Right!" nodding, everyone agreed, and they spun back one full day so they could get enough sleep before starting out on their assignments.

First thing they did on waking was go out and visit Trelawney. The oracle was almost pathetically glad to see them, and told them all about reforging the Cauldron. Harry bolstered her defenses around the Goblet by transfiguring several dozen more six foot tall wooden

soldiers, arming them with air rifles based on a French design that had once been considered a terror weapon as they left no smoke and could kill a man silently at long range - of course that was in a day of muskets, but they were still plenty deadly against spiders, which were the worst danger in that forest.

Then they interviewed her.

Trelawney, having had her memory restored, proved to have an encyclopedic knowledge of Dumbledore's worst schemes and most risky ventures over her tenure as his private oracle, as he'd consulted her on almost everything that held even the slightest risk to him or his plans.

Now with those memories restored, she could lambaste him better than any other person alive. They needed several pages for that article alone, making it practically a pamphlet by itself, and entitled it: "Confessions of an Oracle" beginning it with a paragraph detailing how she became enslaved to one of the most respected men of modern times. Then what kind of a man he was under that utterly false mask. The article throughout proved how exactly contrary to the facts that popular impression of his goodness was, and it held enough material to even shock Harry, who'd thought he was beyond shocking.

Clearly, the Trelawney piece was going to be one of the feature articles of the Daily Prophet's last edition.

But there was more. Harry went off prowling the castle invisibly, broke into the Slytherin dormitories to catch Snape early on that day so he could rape the greasy man's mind for details on his and Dumbledore's plots together.

Dumbledore spent most of his time at the castle. His staff knew more about him than some supposed, although less than they thought they did, as most had not yet discovered his foul side.

Or, if they had, they'd not been allowed to remember it.

However, Snape was one of those exceptions. He, as a willing participant of some of the ugliness going on, was allowed to retain those memories, and so by skimming through them, Harry was able to discover a great deal. Doing so he learned several important things, namely about the pair's shared oaths to each other and the horcruxes they used to revive the other - but also the security methods on those horcruxes.

Now, a soul anchor wasn't used up when employed any more than a ship's anchor was. Its purpose was not to bring one back to life but to keep one from really dying. It prevented complete death by keeping a part of the soul 'in the living' so to speak. That way the rest of the spirit could be recovered and embodied through other means.

To use a childish comparison, having a horcrux was like touching 'Safe'. Or, to use a better expression, it was like an old fashioned diving helmet, one with its own tube going back up to the surface. The person could enter the water (or, with a horcrux die), yet still breathe because of that connection to the surface (life). And it was a trivial effort to haul them back out by that attached connection.

And you could use such a helmet again and again. It wasn't used up by this.

So it was vitally important the kids get to and remove those if they wanted this little war to end in their favor. But the security on that room was far more modern than on the nearly-forgotten vaults. It made the Headmaster's office look tame - and that was a place Harry had not yet dared to venture.

Regardless, they'd come up with something. They had to. But it might take a bit of work thinking over the problem, as this wasn't something they could approach with just cards... well, maybe they could. But a failed attempt would be worse than no attempt at all, as that would only serve to put Dumbledore on guard, and that would make things harder.

The real trouble there was their Potions Professor didn't know most of the security around that room - and KNEW he didn't know it. Although, Harry did pick up countless useful insights into the spying methods

used at Hogwarts, including one rather special trip down memory lane where Snape had reported theft of his potions stocks, and the pair of pureblooded wizards had come to the conclusion they had been infiltrated by agents of Colonel Sanders.

That was funny, and could be useful. The fact that Dumbles used Watch Skulls was informative too.

Knowledge of security methods used, as well as a fair degree of placement of same, counted for most of the battle in avoiding their attention; although it scared Harry more than a bit at just how extensive those spy nets were.

Regardless, they had to continue, and part of that was this last edition of the Prophet, for which Harry decided to make Snape's contributions another leading article - confessions of Dumbledore's right hand man on murders he'd committed and so on. It was going to be another multi-page feature article.

That ought to smart. When it hit, public opinion of the two ought to drop like rocks. And it deserved to.

Not surprisingly, Snape proved to have a wealth of knowledge regarding Dumbledore's many secrets. But Filch did as well, when Harry got around to checking that bitter man. The angry caretaker had been involved in countless cover ups over the years, and knew where the bodies were buried - in some cases quite literally.

Dumbledore himself was too canny and powerful at the mind arts to check, so Harry didn't bother. However, most of the other teachers knew bits of the puzzle that was Dumbledore's private life. By themselves, those pieces were nothing of consequence, or slightly odd but not disturbing. Once added to the rest of the picture, however, they became downright shocking.

Food for companion articles, if nothing else.

Luna, Sybil and Trelawney were all engaged full time converting the mess of plots and memories Harry uncovered into usable articles, writing at desks Trelawney had grown for that purpose. Oh, and the

dryad had taken this opportunity to filch all of Harry's books too. He was too busy to ask why.

What shocked him most, but shouldn't have, was the depths to which Minerva McGonagall and Professor Hagrid had been engaged in supporting the Dark Ravenclaw. Minerva had been engaged in no small number of cover ups of school affairs, like diverted tuition and such, while Hagrid had been a 'fetch and carry man' for Dumbledore over countless schemes. What was odd was how both maintained the illusion that it was all For The Greater Good.

Both still firmly believed Dumbledore was a great and good man, something that blew the minds of Harry and his friends as they went over the material discovered from those two minds. Harry suspected both had something of an unwillingness to see real problems with the man they trusted so much, and he resented that, but couldn't change it.

The next Daily Prophet might though.

They snuck into the newspaper office right after closing, as they needed all the time they could get for resetting the type from what the editors and Dumbledore had wanted to print (one that defended Dumbledore rigorously, and contained retractions of everything bad they'd said the previous day) to this new edition, which did far more damage to him than the one before.

Luckily, Luna knew all of the spells for resetting type and running a press.

Harry set some extra wards so the print staff would be disabled when they came back, so they couldn't interrupt the new paper printing, and the teens began to compose the most sensational magical newspaper of all time.

They had so much to include the Last Edition of the Daily Prophet was going to come out as a small book, and that was crammed as tightly as they could get it, and only summarizing the worst of it. The newspaper would be as thick as the largest muggle editions, almost beyond the ability of owls to carry.

The full details of everything they'd learned about the man were out of the question. It would fill an encyclopedia set and then some. They hadn't finished processing it yet themselves.

Things got so Harry was considering dropping some sections so they could make certain to print the most vital ones. However, when he suggested they didn't need the Draco as Murderer article as much...

Luna's face clouded over in anger. "I must insist we destroy Draco. He tried to murder me. I cannot just ignore that!"

"Agreed." Harry was a little stunned, having never seen her angry before.

By way of apology, he added, "It's just... sooner or later, we're going to have to destroy the Twinkling Tyrant of Hogwarts, as well as Voldieburger and his band of fries. I thought it best to focus on them for now."

Luna smiled and kissed him on the nose. "Of course, Harry. Just don't neglect the enemy pawns, for any one of them could become a queen."

"Yes Darling."

Hermione giggled. "And now we have a name we can refer to Dumbledore with in the entire edition - The Twinkling Tyrant. I'll bet we can have the entire magical world using it by morning."

"All Dark Lords need their 'doing business as' titles," Luna agreed demurely.

So the Draco article got included, plus photo. It even got expanded to include a made-up story about how Luna had been rescued by her fiancé, who'd been out doing some late night flying on the Quidditch pitch and seen her fall, then saved her in time - as one might expect so brilliant a Seeker to do!

Printing the truth would've worked, but it also would've exposed how she had really survived. And if your enemy knows your defenses he can work around them. So, depriving Draco of tactical data like 'throwing her off tall objects isn't going to work' they could hopefully frustrate any further attempts.

In the end, they decided two owls could carry each paper, and simply make multiple trips to get the papers out to their full circulation base. Hogwarts and the Ministry would naturally be LAST to get their copies, as those were the people most likely to warn Dumbledore of what was going on.

And that freedom to grow as large as they wanted within the limits of a newspaper allowed them to include extras that would otherwise have been neglected, but that really could be appreciated by certain parties.

On hearing of his belief that Colonel Sanders was behind some of his recent setbacks, a giggling Hermione suggested they run an ad in the personals section: Chicken seeks worm and spider for dinner engagement.

Let Dumbledore think Colonel Sanders had destroyed the Daily Prophet.

Luna and Harry liked it, as it pointed attention away from their antics and put the blame on a muggle who didn't exist anymore. Any attention spent by Dumbles on false targets was not being used to hit his real enemies - them.

Speaking of real targets, Luna reminded and they included the true story of the origin and rise of Tom Riddle, aka, Lord Voldemort - including the fact that this halfblood had personally executed the last pureblooded heir to the Slytherin line. No reason not to destroy his power base at the same time.

One of the last things they did in composing this landmark edition was to title the paper with a headline: Must Read! (which was their sneaky way of getting the magical public to peruse the entire thing, as

the headline itself was a subliminal command most people would follow).

In the end, after having used their entire spun back day collecting articles then working the press all through the night, they were ready.

Regretfully, they'd had to use wand magic to get all the work done, and wand use was something Dumbledore was disturbingly accurate at tracking and identifying. So, in response, Harry got a few dozens sticks of TNT along with chemical fuses. They put those in junked cars that he'd collected from a scrap yard, shrunk and carried in to the press building, then placed where the printing press HAD been before they'd shrunk and stolen it... and all the unused paper, ink, and anything else they could find in that workroom that related to printing newspapers, or anything else for that matter.

Hermione wanted her textbooks, so they stole all of the component pieces of the printing art from that place for her new project.

"Why are you dosing the delivery owls with a mild sleeping potion?" Luna asked as Harry was just finishing up.

He grinned for her. "This paper has, on occasion, been late. Frankly, it won't raise too many eyebrows if the 'morning' paper wasn't delivered until early afternoon. I just want to put off post it mid to late morning so I have time for one last vote in the Wizengamot. This edition is going to create a MASSIVE stir, and there is one thing I'd like those geezers to do before their attention gets diverted away from 'Poor Harry Potter'."

Luna thought about it a moment before nodding, then asked sweetly, "I have to wonder if Giant Squid is the sort of animal that Harry Potter might decide to raise."

"Well, yes," Harry responded with a knowing grin. "In fact, let's go there next. I can make a portkey, and have a lake on my family property I'm sure it'll enjoy. I already looked it up, and Dumbledore's family never established any kind of legal ownership of the beast. It's not registered as theirs. So if I happen to find and collect it there's

nothing he can legally do - although I'm going to keep it on a Fidelius property all the same, just in case."

"Are the explosives all set?" Hermione asked nervously.

Harry nodded. "Chemical timers. Plus I altered the wards so anyone coming in who DOESN'T set off the old wards will set off my new ones and that will trigger the bombs. One big blast, in what you'll note is a shielded room that shouldn't hurt anybody, and all that'll be left is metal scrap. Maybe he won't be able to identify us by our wand magic after the explosive goes off, but I don't know. We can hope though."

"Do we have to worry about the newspaper staff?" she asked in concern.

Harry's smile broadened in delight. "No. As part of his 'cleanup' yesterday Dumbles gave everyone except the print workers the day off to think about how much they'd upset him, and to sweat and wonder if they were coming back to their old jobs or not. The only people we have to worry about are the actual printers, and I was going to go visit all of their houses and stun them so they won't be in today. That way nobody should bother this place until the papers are delivered, and the bomb has gone off."

Hermione sucked in her bottom lip. "Too chancy. You leave behind too many wand traces that way. Even if he can't detect us by our traces left here, all he'd have to do is go to one of those many houses to see who stunned them."

Harry blinked in shock, admitting, "You're right. I hadn't thought of that."

"What we should do is move the owls and papers to another building so that even if something goes wrong, those still get delivered," the bookworm advised. "Then set off the bombs here before anyone is to arrive."

"Easy to do," Luna demurely supplied. "The owls obey orders. All we must do is send them with the papers to a place of our choosing, with

orders to send out them like regular at a time of our choosing. But what place shall we use?"

Harry grinned. "You know, there's a KFC not far from here... One temporarily closed for renovations..."

Both the girls grinned wickedly.

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In the early morning light Harry crept invisibly into the Great Hall, rushing directly up to the chair of the Headmaster. Quickly and efficiently, using a knife of living silver gotten from the LeStrange vaults, he cut the wooden legs so they would collapse outward the moment someone sat in the chair, dropping them straight down. Then he bored a hole in the center of the seat from the bottom up, leaving the wood on top on paper thin. Then, taking out of his pouch a muggle pipe sharpened on one end so it came to a wicked point and coated in tebo grease so it would be invisible for a few hours, he set it up on its stand so it fit directly under the nearly-through hole.

After that, Harry screwed a premade device to the bottom of the table, also coated in tebo grease, then scurried out of there as fast as he could go.

At breakfast that morning, not two hours later, Dumbledore greeted his staff on his way to that chair as usual, and sat down. The legs immediately fell away, dropping Dumbledore straight onto that spike, which penetrated the paper thin layer of remaining wood without pause and buried itself a full two feet into his guts. Triggered by the chair's collapse, two scythe blades sprang out from under the table and carved the Headmaster's chest in half, going right through the heart and slicing off both his arms in the process.

So he died. He died rather quickly, actually. Unfortunately, Snape was there to cover it up, collect all the parts, Obliviate staff and students, destroy all the evidence, and drag the Headmaster off to where he could be revived.

Unfortunately for Snape, he'd incinerated the devices and vanished the ashes to dispose of the evidence rather than try to explain the trap to a recently Obliviated staff. So he didn't know, because he hadn't examined it, that the pipe had actually served a dual purpose, not just to drive a few feet of metal into Dumbledore's guts, but to serve as a muggle syringe of sorts, injecting a full quart of malaclaw venom into those so recently perforated guts - enough venom to equal dozens of bites. And this venom was part of Dumbledore's body when the Headmaster got raised by his servant, so it remained in him.

But nobody there was thinking about the delayed paper, or that Harry had left the castle wards to go call a meeting of the Wizengamot again.

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"Well now who looks like the cat that ate the canary?" Hermione teased as Harry rejoined them just after the hubbub caused during breakfast was dying down. "How did the vote go?" she whispered.

"I got exactly what I wanted," he told her smugly.

"And what was that?" Luna blinked.

"A tiny measure of freedom, as much as I could trick them into giving me, anyway," he responded, in low tones that could not be overheard.

"People are still talking about 'the slap heard 'round the Great Hall'!" Luna gloated in a more normal voice, changing the topic.

They chuckled, and Harry began filling up his plate, seeing as how Dumbledore had been indisposed and the teachers too flustered to order the tables cleared yet.

Shortly after, they split up to go to their classes.

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The Wizengamot was just breaking up after some early morning business when the daily paper arrived. Most were shocked at the sheer size of it, and the title of 'Must Read' indeed sat them back down to peruse it, and as they did the atmosphere of that room suddenly underwent a change as though a dementor had entered those chambers.

It was too silent to be called an explosion. Besides, the magic of the many multiple redundant compulsion charms kept them reading long after they would have stopped. So there was no ranting, raving, denials or shouting, despite how much many of those members wanted to.

However, their reactions may have been more intense because they were denied those easy outlets.

Faces paled in stark terror as plot after plot got revealed. Hands shook where they gripped papers as those schemes unfolded. No horror novel had ever caused such reactions. Depictions of medieval atrocities of the work of Nazi death camps had never been more shocking to their witnesses as their illusions and self-delusions got stripped away.

It was like learning that Santa Claus did not dwell on the North Pole, but on a mountain of skulls in a castle of pain and sat on a throne of blood, feasting on small babies and torturing the souls of the innocent to fuel his sleigh.

And, minus some specifics such as the sleigh and red suit, that's almost exactly what it was. No one had been more beloved than Dumbledore, and so it was not possible to measure the depths of his betrayal.

And because of the magics worked into those papers, it was not possible for most people to disbelieve them as the tales of treachery unfolded.

Conversations stopped among those lucky few who had not subscribed to the paper, and they watched first in puzzlement, then in growing amazement, and finally in alarm as the horror of their reading

brethren deepened and deepened. Pitiful wails began to emerge, croaking forth from the trembling lips of those whose eyes remained stuck to those papers.

Seeing those headlines for themselves, many of those who had not gotten papers began to go out to find copies of their own to read.

Horror changed to terror as people continued to read, and read, and read. It didn't seem like there was any end to the devilry exposed. One they had, almost to a man, viewed as the epitome of all that was good in the magical world instead proved to be guilty of worse horrors than Voldemort. And not just a little here or there, but on a continual basis.

Shrieks of terror began as reactions overcame their normal habits, but did not stop their reading. People stood up, still reading, and trembled like leaves in a hurricane unable to tear their eyes from their papers. More than a few members of that august body collapsed, a few in heart attacks, the rest in shock, as the scandals exposed just grew in depth and complexity.

There didn't seem to be any END to them!!

Finally some of the quickest readers finished out those tales of horror, dread and putrid intrigue. Then the vomiting, shouting and ravings began.

Out in houses and homes across magical Britain, husbands already cradled collapsed wives. Children shocked to their cores gazed off in silent dread. Drinks got spilled and breakfasts ruined.

Then the frantic calls to the Ministry began.

The reaction was much the same overseas, where in Ministry after Ministry the august personages governing wizarding Europe stopped what they were doing in wonder as a couple members of those bodies got Daily Prophets and followed much the same patterns as those in Britain.

One member in Brussels, a veteran of wars against Grindelwald, calmly finished his paper, then rose and proposed, to the shock and astonishment of all, a measure to declare war on Britain.

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Author's Notes:

I don't mean to disappoint anyone, but unfortunately this is not the end for Albus Dumbledore. This'll hurt him, but it just won't shut him down (sadly). Because you do not accumulate power for so long only to have it taken away so easily. Dumbledore is a genius who has been deceiving and controlling his world for years. You do not get there without containment strategies for any catastrophes that befall you.

The fear and hate of virtually the entire magical world did not stop Voldy from controlling them in the last book. Nor will it stop Dumbles.

Now, that said, they will destroy him, and this IS one blow on that long road. But I fancy this Dumbledore to be a more epic villain than Voldemort ever was, and Rowling spent seven novels bringing that guy down.

Patience, we will get there. I just have so much I want to cover first! Besides, in any fairy tale if you are given three tasks to do the story is not over until you do them!

The story of Dorothy CAN'T end before they get to the Emerald City! And even then, you might get a task or two from the Wizard.

Chapter Thirty-Two

by Lionheart

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Dumbledore got raised from the dead to find a world up in arms against him.

Children stood immobile, frozen in shock, staring mutely and unseeing in the halls of Hogwarts, newspapers either dropped at their feet or dangling from the tips of their fingers, forgotten, as they processed what they'd read. Already the floo was alight with frantic parents storming Hogwarts to rescue their children from him, and angry aurors were swarming all over the place.

How tiresome.

It had been some while since the last revelation of this magnitude. In fact, it was Tom, wasn't it? The one to cause the last such disruption.

With a thought to the wards he controlled, Albus put the school into lockdown - nobody got out, although he continued to let people arrive. It was easier to deal with them here than anywhere, after all.

It all happened in an instant, for the intention was to catch people unawares before they could react. Suddenly every surface inside the castle got sticky: chairs, tables, walls and floors... all of the furniture and surfaces of the castle suddenly grabbed hold of whatever was touching them and would not let go. At the same time an eerie magical silence encompassed those halls preventing speech, shouts of warning or cries of alarm, but particularly spellcasting by the majority of those caught within the castle. Doors and windows slammed shut and would not open for any reason, to any person.

Then the countless suits of armor that stood vigil in every hall, continually overlooked as they were always there and just assumed to be part of the decorations of the castle, there only to grant ambiance, went into motion. Untouched by the stickiness and uncaring of the silence, they caught most people, parents, aurors and

students completely off guard as none of them had ever seen those suits move before.

Before that surprise wore off, those mobile war machines, guardians of the castle responding to Albus Dumbledore's will, had captured and subdued the vast majority of everyone there. Doors would open for them, and the sticky charms did not touch them. They could go anywhere, and there was no way to hide from them.

Caught, immobilized and without ability to cast spells, parents and aurors waited helpless while the suits of armor collected them. Those few able to silently spell cast and whose hands had not been caught touching some bit of wall or bedframe were able to free their feet and resist the onslaught, but those were few and easily overcome by superior numbers, pressed in on every side by mobile, spell-resistant suits of armor, while gargoyles emerged from shadows to swoop on them from above.

The resistance was over within minutes.

To Albus, they were simply rioters, a nuisance, pests at best. Insects under his feet to be herded for The Greater Good. And they had dared to come disrupt the peaceful operations of his castle?

People had died for less.

No one, but simply no one, challenged him at the seat of his power! Hogwarts was too ancient and too well protected for that.

After his control of the castle was secure people arriving by floo simply fell into a trap, caught by the sticky floors as they tumbled out of fireplaces and silent as well. They became easy prey for the suits of armor waiting nearby to capture them.

Once that was taken care of, a slight review of the warning alarms discerned what caused this ruckus, and Albus sent the House Elves about gathering every issue of that newspaper, not just within this castle but wherever they could find them. Unfortunately for him, due to his bad luck, while many of the elves would find and collect a paper or two from outside the castle, they ran afoul of wards recently raised

by newly paranoid individuals and very few of the elves that left the castle to collect newspapers returned.

That done, and part of the problem addressed, he gave mental orders to the suits of armor and they began moving people about. He had them gather the aurors together first. In fact, it was fortunate he had so many of them, that made the rest of this cleanup easier.

Crawling out of the cauldron that Snape had raised him in, Dumbledore once more left that secret chamber and made his way up to the Great Hall where the aurors had been forcefully gathered, Snape trotting obediently along at his heels like a greasy puppy, neither one affected by the sticky charms. Doors opened before them, and they made their way swiftly through the crowds to see the catch of aurors brought together.

"Obliviate!" Albus waved his wand and smiled, the magically imposed silence having lifted in this one room. He loved that spell, and had never once failed at performing it since mastering the Elder Wand. Smiling, he told the aurors, "A great crisis has come upon us. It seems that an organization of nere-do-wells has afflicted the magical population, treating today's issue of the Daily Prophet with a potion that on contact causes madness, delusions and frenzy. People no longer trust even those of us who are most trustworthy. But fear not! They can be cured!"

Grinning, glad to feel the thrill of this kind of power even though he avoided circumstances like this as much as he could, Albus seized all the aurors with a magical compulsion to follow his orders, then released them from their bonds. "Come! Follow me."

To his great surprise many of the aurors shot spells at his back as he turned to lead them all to the nearest floo; which quickly led to a fight among them as aurors turned on each other, some in his defense, others trying to attack him. Quickly he reactivated the wards concerning the attackers and the spell resistant suits of armor put down the rebellion quickly.

Still, that issue troubled Dumbledore greatly, as that meant he had failed not only with the Obliviate, but also the follow up compulsion as well. It had been decades since he had flubbed any spell so badly. There was only the remotest possibility of him having the least degree of trouble on such familiar spells, but to have the bad luck to have failed on two of them in short order?

That troubled him greatly.

Suspecting something, he was not a great genius for nothing, Dumbledore quickly scanned himself. When he found what he did, he quickly turned and, in a rage, cast a Crucio on Severus, holding for several minutes until the man had gone quite mad.

Then, having worked out his rage, he Obliviate the memory of that experience and told Snape curtly, "You failed to check for residuals, my friend. Not only did some enemy slay me, they also injected malaclaw venom into my body."

Curled up on the floor trembling and weak as his body spasmed from the aftereffects of exposure to the Cruciatus, Snape could only simper weakly that he was sorry.

Sighing, Dumbledore dismissed the man from his concerns and summoned a bottle of the antidote from his office, only to have the wards report that it smashed on the inside entrance to his tower, the door having failed to open.

Cursing himself for having forgotten his luck, Dumbledore stormed up to his tower himself to fetch a bottle personally, slipping on two banana peels before he'd even left the Great Hall, cracking his head each time, and running into countless faces he'd rather not see on his way there.

Finally getting to his office he yanked open a drawer, in the process jostling it and getting several bottles caught in the mechanism and smashed, their precious contents dribbling out, mingled with other fluids and ruined. Forcing himself to move more calmly, he selected a vial of antidote, uncapped it and was about to drink when something occurred to him.

Setting it back down, he cast several diagnostic charms and found to his horror that this vial had gone bad, turning from an antidote to a lethal poison. Checking over the remaining contents of the drawer, he found that to be the case with all of his vials of the antidote.

Although there was one bottle mislabeled as antidote that instead contained a potion that violently reacted with malaclaw venom, and would have caused an explosion tearing his body to shreds had he drunk it.

He hadn't even noticed the switch on the first pass, only growing suspicious on finding that one bottle did not react to his spell detecting spoiled goods. The potion within that bottle had been perfectly fine, not spoiled at all, just lethal in combination with malaclaw venom. And he never would've known if he'd not checked a little further, suspicious one antidote had survived when his luck had been bad enough to ruin all the rest.

The recent destruction of his office had destroyed most of the equipment there, and he was still not done moving back in, but he still had private labs inside the tower that remained untouched and he had always made sure to keep those cabinets well stocked. Going there, he found an experiment he had been working on had reacted negatively to his activation of the wards locking down the castle, and the resultant explosion had caused a fireball that spewed out corrosives and ruined the place more thoroughly than if a giant had picked up the room of delicate glassware and shook it vigorously.

Still, he was far too old and canny to be entirely out of options. Standing still, Albus cast several medical charms upon himself, ranging from well known to obscure, to both diminish the effects of the poison and reduce its duration. Then, having done what he could with a wand, he very carefully went back to his office, over to another cabinet where he kept another drawer full of less restricted potions. Not as good as full cures, yet still something.

There was a small stack of books lying on top of this, left there haphazardly when he'd been reorganizing his office from the recent fire, and they slipped backwards off the top of the cabinet and fell out

the window behind it as he stumbled and bumped the case. Biting back a curse for not having replaced the missing glass from that window as yet, Albus focused on the task at hand and cast several security wards and unbreakable charms on the bottles in the drawer before he cautiously opened it.

As he'd thought, several of the bottles had gone bad, some visibly shaking as the materials inside them had become volatile and would have exploded in his face had his charms not made that impossible.

A streeler had also found its way inside of that case, and its corrosive slime had ruined everything else. He spitefully flung that animal out the window in full knowledge the snail-like creature would have its shell shattered below.

Sitting down in his chair to think over the issue, Dumbledore tumbled over backwards as a minor fault in the wood chose that moment to break and spill him on the floor, where a bookcase also mysteriously failed and fell on him, crushing both his legs after burying him under a pile of books.

Cursing and struggling, it was half an hour before he was able to wandlessly levitate the heavy piece of furniture off of him, as things kept going wrong as he tried. Finally able to reclaim the wand that had skittered out of reach as he'd fallen, Dumbledore fixed both his broken legs, and the arm and ribs that had been broken in the subsequent struggling, with quick and efficient medical charms, instantly restoring them to function.

At last a house elf responded to his repeated calls, and brought him a potion out of the medical wing. It was a general purpose antitoxin, not nearly what he needed at all, but all of Snape's own stores of malaclaw antidote had also mysteriously gone bad.

Dumbledore had no doubt that his luck was bad enough all of that antidote in England had mysteriously developed flaws, or would if he went after them.

Finally he had to content himself with consuming a dozen bezoars and the general purpose antitoxin. That caused the cloud to lift enough that he was able to obtain a dose of aging potion. While not his first choice, the magical age it caused would to some extent consume the remaining duration of that terrible venom and reduce its effects substantially.

To counter the rest, Dumbledore drank a vial of Liquid Luck whose own good fortune had been sufficient to preserve it when all else in his office had gone bad. He hadn't dared reach for it until after taking other measures, however, as the conflict between luck, both good and bad, could have caused nearly anything to happen if both had remained at full force when combined.

Thus fortified, Dumbledore left the office to go muster his troops, casting all of the Oblivates and compulsions over again and checking each person down the line as he did so. Once reassured that this had gone well and luck was no longer totally against him, Dumbledore led his aurors to the Ministry where he again used their own wards to lock down the building and subdue those inside, interrupting the vote of the Wizengamot that would've removed him, and using his aurors to help him subdue the Ministry Obliviators.

Dumbledore then converted them as he'd done the aurors sent to Hogwarts, along with a new supply of aurors found at the locked down Ministry, and sent the trained corps of Ministry employees out to correct the Prophet Problem.

Ministry Obliviators were accustomed to cleaning up after large scale events. Although their normal work was done erasing the minds of muggles, they could do the same to witches and wizards without trouble. He told them the same story he'd given to the converted aurors, then let them get to it and erase the magical world's memory of that newspaper. He sent along aurors to stamp out any resistance to their memory modifying efforts, but also to collect and destroy any of those newspapers they encountered.

They started working on those already inside the Ministry building, then went off to Hogwarts. From there, they would spread out to cover the rest of the magical world. Dumbledore himself stayed

behind and personally did the work correcting the minds of the members of the Wizengamot, then made doubly sure of his work as he did so.

Dumbledore had so much POWER to throw at his problems that barely a thing could hurt him much, or for long. Of course that had limits, particularly in this case where the scope and scale were so broad that not even the most thorough efforts could clean it all up.

Even the best magical compulsion clouds the mind and prevents thinking on the part of the person compelled. People who aren't thinking don't do their best work, particularly on large or complex problems, and this was both.

Dumbledore's remedy would solve a lot of problems and save him a great deal of effort, but due to the nature of the compulsion he'd laid to get most of the work done there would be inevitable errors and bad patches in his fix.

A handful of aurors among those gathering newspapers chanced to glance at the headline and fell prey to another magical compulsion, this one to read that paper yet again. Some of those would continue dazedly about their work of protecting the men and women Obliviating the memories of that paper out of the minds of others, even while fighting an internal battle with their own compulsions the whole while.

A few would break free of Dumbledore's hold and, after seeing other aurors objecting and getting subdued, Obliviated and recompulsed, slipped away quietly, only pretended to help, or otherwise threw wrenches in the gears.

They were only a handful, but it was a few.

One young auror, who'd recovered yet seen the problem as yet another of her fellows got subdued and recompulsed after a memory wipe, made it her business to simply tell her compelled companions, "This home has already been done," and the not-thinking squad moved on over and over again.

Many parents had been so horrified by what they'd read they had not stuck around Hogwarts to stay and chat. Instead they'd grabbed their children and gotten out of there before the lockdowns began. Those people were most of them in transit, so missed by the Ministry squads of aurors and Obliviators making the rounds of all of the magical businesses and homes.

Also there were a number of other people, out discussing the news in parks and pubs, that were missed in this general sweep; and most of them were further horrified when they got home to discover whatever family or friends they'd left behind while out on those errands had somehow mysteriously forgotten everything about that most sensational news.

A handful of magical people even saw the Ministry squads coming and either hid or ran away. Some of those spread warnings, a few of which got received and believed in time. But also a number of newspapers got missed, and those who had fled the memory purges were often able to reinfect the minds of those who'd been Obliviated with the news they were suppressing.

Those who continued to raise a fuss after falling through the cracks the first time got caught up and Obliviated on return sweeps. So it was the quiet ones who remained aware of what was going on.

So, by and large, while the Ministry squads were able to quell the panic and restore much of the order that had been lost, they actually caused a panic of an entirely new sort among the pockets that remained.

People had just seen Ministry employees in a widescale suppression of the magical populace, and witnessed them erasing memories of a great scandal. That was enough to shatter their faith in magical government and make conspiracy theorists out of a lot of previously trusting folks.

Of course, in this case that was far from inaccurate. Conspiring to take over the government was exactly what Voldemort did, and he was not the only one. Lucius had been a master conspirator, practically in charge from the time he'd been let go. But Dumbledore

did not need to conspire with anyone. That would require sharing power. No, he was enough all by himself to control things and pull strings. He had only puppets, not fellow conspirators.

Grindelwald had been one once, but... sigh. He'd had to destroy him. It was better for his plans to go it alone anyway. It was 'For The Greater Good.'

Still, this movement of those who had somehow escaped magical mind mods had given birth to a brand new class of paranoids as they saw and witnessed how easy it was for their government to simply make it as though something that huge hadn't even happened. And a level of fear and distrust set in that would lead to a partisan style movement not unlike the French Resistance as those who knew used carefully stored newspapers to waken a few fellows to the awful reality of their situation.

A small but significant sliver of the populace now regarded themselves as under the rule of a Dark Lord, and began wondering what to do about it.

Also, the British Ministry could do nothing about the international reaction to the news, or stop its spread there. And those other nations couldn't help noticing that Britain had an unusual silence on the whole affair after its very brief uproar. Nor did they suppose that, on looking into it, those Obliviators had been called up for no reason.

That they, and their auror escorts, had been called up by Dumbledore was a cause for alarm even among those who'd still trusted him.

Other nations even looked into the claim of a contact potion causing madness and found that it just was not so. Although they did discover the heavy taint of magic over every page and letter trying to convince people of the truth of its contents, a brief look over their files found that had been true of every issue of that notable English newspaper.

Legislation began to be drawn up at once prohibiting magical compulsions in any wizarding media of an ICW member state.

Dumbledore was most perturbed.

Even in spite of his tremendous success in reversing both his own horrible luck and the catastrophic combination of that awful revelation of his secret exploits that accompanied it, he still had major problems.

In the wake of an event like this one he always liked to print a retraction in the newspaper as part of the general cleanup. It helped everything be more thorough and complete, catching odd spots other efforts missed.

However, he had just been to the Daily Prophet offices. Apparently Ministry aurors had been there before him, going through in force right after getting their newspapers, trying to get more information and, he hoped, still trusting enough they might have been trying to confirm whether it was a hoax or not.

But the aurors that had battered down those doors had eventually been forced to employ curse breakers to penetrate his wards, and they had been in such a rush that the results had not been pretty.

The building was trashed, his careful wards destroyed by massive effort on the part of dozens of wizards, maybe even a hundred working in concert as they'd brought them down so fast.

The newspaper building was a shambles, but buildings were cheap, and he could repair or replace this one easily enough. No, somehow in all of the fighting, spell casting, investigating and general mayhem his printing press had been destroyed.

That was a major problem.

Due to his own laws, Dumbledore couldn't get another press as they were illegal to buy, sell, give or trade. Nor did he have the time, knowledge or skills to create one. The press he'd used was also a very special one, imprinting spells on every sheet, and that was not a feature one could just buy. The man who'd made this one for him had died long ago, fighting on the side of Voldemort actually. But his

memory of how to create such a special press had been erased long before that by Dumbledore.

He'd secured his own press long before slapping down those now inconvenient laws intended to restrict others from acquiring any. Now he couldn't even hire a person to make him a replacement as that got covered by the 'cannot be traded' part of the laws. And compliance on this was monitored as closely as underage magic. If he used underhanded means to replace his press, the Ministry would know. He'd made sure of that himself to prevent others from doing the very schemes he considered now.

It had always been in his best interests before to make breaking that law impossible, or nearly so. Only now he found himself running afoul of those same ultra-enforced regulations!

He'd thought himself so clever, nicely sewing up all of the little loopholes and methods that might be used to deceive the law or get around enforcement. But he hadn't considered the Lovegoods, and he hadn't considered this.

It was actually harder to break a small law like this one, and get away with it, than Obliviate the entire Wizengamot - something he couldn't permit himself to do too frequently as, like stealing cookies out of a jar, done too often the dropping level of their intellects would betray him no matter how stealthily the actual work was done. Just like an empty cookie jar bespoke childhood theft. And his intellect would remain much like smears of chocolate on that child's face. The telltales would be too obvious to ignore.

So he could either dismantle some part of that set of laws, and the web of traps he'd laid to ensure enforcement, or go without a press himself. Both were completely unacceptable, as any loopholes he created would open up the possibility of someone else getting hold of a press at the same time. There were countless political opponents who had been seething over the Prophet's effectual monopoly, having recognized the propaganda value it gave him, and some of them were clever enough to recognize whatever loophole he opened to acquire a replacement and make use of it themselves.

Many, many more were clever enough to copycat those who did.

Pressure had been building on this for some time, other clans wanting their own newspapers. His opponents had been too canny to grant the Prophet a legal monopoly, it was perfectly legal for other presses and newspapers to exist. But he'd outmaneuvered them, shutting down all competitors to lock that niche down himself. Only now, like a boiler under pressure, the least hole opened up in that lockdown could release an explosion of others getting their own printing presses using whatever methods he did, as soon as he'd opened the laws enough to do so.

But how was he to print a paper without a printing press to do so? Not only that, but his special ink and type were also missing. He could tell those at least had been stolen, removed by some unknown party, as had those ink barrels been ruptured the ink spill over the floor would've been terrible, and none of the metal fragments strewn about the room were his special runic enhanced font - he'd tried summoning for the letters but nothing happened, and at least one among those many small pieces ought to have survived.

Trouble was, so many Ministry workers had already been over the place that between all those recently cast spells, and the explosion in the workplace, that he could not identify any usable wand signatures out of the mess. So anyone might have done it. He simply had no clues.

Albus stared closely at a hubcap, wondering where that part had come from on his printing press and pondering what could be done with a few repair spells, when the Liquid Luck potion he'd taken, whose duration had also been reduced by the aging potion he'd taken before it, chose that moment to run out and the building collapsed on top of him, squashing him like a bug and killing the man miserably over a painful few minutes.

Unfortunately for everyone honest, a standing order he'd given his phoenix required it to immediately reclaim his body and return it to Hogwarts should he die outside it. So Fawkes showed up and flamed out with his corpse, taking it to that secret room in the school dungeons where Snape, grudgingly and still spasming over the

Cruciatus cast on him earlier, went about raising him from the dead yet again.

Unfortunately for Dumbledore, they'd run out of mandrake that very morning on the earlier raising of him from the dead. Thus a total restoration to his original state was no longer so easy. A plentiful supply of phoenix tears made it possible, but not guaranteed as it was possible to heal badly.

Indeed, Snape was spasming so much (his post-cruciatus potions had all been destroyed in an unlucky accident) that he got the ritual wrong three times.

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Author's Notes:

Frankly, the trouble with starting out fighting directly against your Big Bad Boss Villain is that the moment you're done beating him the story is over.

And, well, I always thought those suits of armor ought to serve some purpose. As well as Hogwarts serving more than just informational purposes.

Chapter Thirty-Three

by Lionheart

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Last chapter was from Dumbles POV, this chap, same day, our heroes POV.

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Harry was having a bit of quiet time in an outside courtyard, waiting for the insanity to start. But his thoughts were not on the impending madness. No. He had been reviewing his move at the Wizengamot previously that day, and projecting the possibilities that presented forward.

Chess games often went to the one who thought farthest ahead, after all.

Actually, cards might be a better analogy, he felt, as you never knew what each new deal was going to turn up. He certainly hadn't expected this latest opportunity to milk the Wizengamot, not after what he'd done with his first.

But before being blotted out by the Prophet scandal, the public tide of 'Save Our Poor Boy Hero' had risen yet further, cresting higher than he could've supposed on the revelations about how put upon he was at court. The feeling was that the entire Wizengamot had cheated him on that vote, which they had, and eager to save their jobs those people on that body had been willing to do just about anything to regain some popularity in the public's eyes - and top of their list had been to be seen doing something nice for Harry.

The question had been, how to exploit that? (And quickly, before the Daily Prophet captured public attention and he lost this chance).

Left to their own devices, they'd grant him a measly cash reward, pin a few ribbons on his chest, throw another title at him, then let him starve as the wolves came down to devour him after being left out in

the cold again; if they did anything before the Prophet's scandal wiped it all from their minds.

So it was a definite case of 'Use it or lose it.' Even without the distraction today's morning articles were going to provide, left to themselves they'd say a great many gracious things but never actually do anything to improve his situation. So, if he wanted anything substantial to happen he had to make a request for it, and fast, before they got something else in mind. Ideally, he would make his suggestion in such a way as to prove them all absolute heels and tyrants if they refused him, pushing them into whatever he wanted.

But such things had limits, rather sharp ones really.

No, they needed to be seen doing something to make up for voting against his freedom and for the roundabout way they'd been used to send him back to the Dursleys after the first criminal exposure of their actions, but they were still canny old politicians, backbiters by profession. Harry had to be canny himself if he wanted anything useful out of them.

In short, what the members of the Wizengamot wanted was some way to give him something that turned out to be nothing, and what he wanted was a way to trick them into granting him what looked to be nothing but actually turned out to be something, and the more valuable the better.

What Harry would like most was something like he already had - the perpetual licenses and hereditary exemptions for keeping and raising just about any type and number of magical beasts.

The first thought to cross his mind was to do the same for magical plants, except that lay too close to what he'd already achieved. The ink was not yet dry on those laws waiving the government's ability to restrict him there, and if those rights were vulnerable to removal at any time that time was now. So he didn't want to draw any attention to what he had until he'd already been doing it for a while and the rights and precedent were well established.

Similarly, he didn't want to ask for anything expanding those creature rights beyond what they already were, lest by drawing their attention those cunning crones in government begin to restrict and retract what they'd already given to him, passing exemptions to his exemptions and so on.

"Oh, you can do that, but not for THIS... or this, or this, or this, or this, or this..." ad infinitum until those new rights were useless. Which they would do. They'd eagerly snatch the bread from his mouth if they could get away with it, just on the general principle of 'The more for you, the less for me.'

The biggest danger of what reward to ask for was trying hard NOT to get the hypocrites in government to punish him by taking away previous rewards, as they would not hesitate to do if they woke up to the reality of what they'd actually done for him in the first place.

Before they found out about the ramifications of what they'd already done for him, he wanted things well established on his side. He wanted momentum working in his favor. The act of "I've been doing it this way for a (hopefully) long time now and it was legal all this time and NOW you want to restrict it?"

The longer he could be using those rights before they discovered what they'd truly granted him, the greater his chance of keeping it. A rock rolled downhill may gather tremendous momentum, but it's still easiest to divert or counter right after the first push. He wanted to be going for a while before they tried to stop him. All of which meant he didn't want to wake them up early.

No, for safety's sake he had to ask for something as different as possible from the rights he'd already achieved, so as not to draw any attention to the earlier gift until he'd gained that momentum, but managing somehow to get very similar results; ie, something that looked innocent, but could be played into a massive advantage and which would hopefully last forever, covering not only himself but his posterity.

And to that, there were many obstacles.

In the first place, they would not agree to grant him anything they felt took away from any privilege one of their number already had - and this was the Wizengamot, the essential collection of the heads of the old clans. Anything that was controlled at all in magical Britain was controlled by a member of that group. They'd only agreed to the beast thing because they'd felt they'd been granting the Boy Who Lived the right to keep a few pets. The details in the wording of those documents had made all the difference between what they really thought they'd granted him and what he'd actually gotten.

Harry had, of course, had a hand in crafting the written documents, and then presenting them to a body too rushed to listen to ought but a summary.

Harry's plans had been similar here. The geezers had been in a terrible rush to reclaim their image as champions of the boy hero. But despite that, what he asked for had to be innocent sounding, yet at the same time break some old monopolies - as there simply was no other way to make a living!

Now he was congratulating himself on his victory, going over the steps again in his mind.

"So, what did you get?" Hermione sat down beside him. "I assumed you didn't want to tell us inside the castle, but out here in a courtyard?"

Harry left off his musing and greeted her warmly. "That's right. I haven't told you yet, have I?"

"Was it the right to shove nifflers down your pants?" Luna inquired eagerly.

"No."

"Have them draw obscene caricatures?"

"Luna, please!" the bushy one snapped. "We haven't got much time before morning classes start."

"Actually, they might NOT start." Harry pointed up. "Look, the owls have begun arriving, two to a newspaper. I think today there might be a touch of a ruckus. They might have difficulty getting classes started."

"Harry?" Hermione whined. "Tell us now? It'll bug me all day if you don't. And any second now we won't have time!"

"Alright," he capitulated, leaving off the teasing for now. "I pulled a dirty trick, and went before that august body carving a wooden flute (badly), and then asked, in a childlike voice, if they could let me sell the things I made."

Luna burst out in giggles.

"That's it?" Hermione was disappointed, and her face showed it.

"That's IT?" He repeated, as Luna fell off the back of the bench laughing. "It was one of the most profound and sneaky things I ever did!"

"It doesn't sound like much," the Granger girl shook her head slowly, even as Luna rolled around on the grass behind them, clutching her gut with laughter.

"That's the whole POINT!" he insisted. "If it sounded like anything good, they wouldn't let me HAVE it! These are career politicians! Before cameras they kiss the babies. Off camera they steal their candy. If they could've torn off my right leg and beaten me with it and called it some kind of reward I'd be on a peg-leg right now with bruises around my neck and shoulders! Getting them to give you something NICE takes enough cunning to steal Snape's nose from his face and sell it on ebay!"

He took a deep breath to calm himself, and started over again while Luna paralyzed herself with laughter on the grass behind them. "Hermione, the privileged elite run things for their own benefit, and that body is made up of the heads of the old families - the very definition of a privileged elite in our magical world. A bunch of greedy conniving old bastards aren't going to give you anything they'd rather

have themselves. They have to be tricked into doing it, and frankly what I got is worth more than the beast concession. I really feel quite proud of myself for pulling it off."

"Perhaps if you explain?" she hedged.

Seeing she only sought understanding, he agreed, even as a pitiful few wails began to emanate from the castle. He could only hear them because Luna was getting quieter. "I admit it sounded perfectly useless. That's point. But it is actually an immense blow to the old wizarding monopolies. They thought they were granting me permission to sell badly made toy flutes, just like when they were granting me the beast licenses they felt they were giving me the ability to hold and keep a few pets. It's the scope and scale that matter."

He paused for a moment to see if she'd gotten it. Seeing she hadn't he continued to explain. "Hermione, virtually all the monopolies in the magical world are some form of 'only I can sell this', or 'only he can sell that'. But I just landed a perpetual, hereditary license to sell ANYTHING AT ALL!"

Her eyes widened and she drew back. "But... don't you have to make..?"

"According to Old Family rules," Luna giggled from where she'd rolled under their bench. "Anything created by Harry himself, any subordinate member of his family, or ANY BUSINESS HE OWNS, was still created by Harry."

Harry nodded gleefully. "The way I phrased and presented it, they thought they were granting me the ability to sell cheap handmade junk whose only value was as Boy-Who-Lived souvenirs. They made a mistake in not thinking of me as an eventual Head of Family, an impression I helped out as much as I possibly could by playing the 'Poor Little Orphan Boy' role to the hilt. What I GOT, if I can pull this off and achieve its maximum potential, is the ability to sell literally anything despite any of the existing monopolies."

Hermione's jaw dropped open and she gaped at him.

Luna was now rising to join them on their seat, forcing Harry to scoot over so he could be mashed between them, a pleasant enough fate. "This destroys the entire medieval monopoly lockdown of the magical markets. Harry could sell food off his farms despite Dumbledore having exclusive right to do that, and even undercut the old man's prices. For that matter he could sell ink as well. If it could be made by something Harry owned, he can sell it."

The blonde gave Harry a very measuring gaze. "For that matter, if he got very lucky indeed perhaps he could trick them into leaving that very open ended and let him sell things NOBODY could sell legally - things like printing presses, perhaps?"

He shook his head. "No such luck."

"Then why do you look so pleased?" Luna pressed while Hermione was still recovering herself. "There has to be something more. That is an 'I've got a secret I haven't shared yet' look, if I'm not mistaken."

A grin broke out from under his control, proving her correct. "I might have something like that in mind, yes," he admitted, while a cacophony of upset screams and shouting steadily got louder from the castle.

Poke.

Poke. Poke.

"Tell," Luna commanded, poking him again in the side.

Harry's grin threatened to overcome his face as he tried to capture her fingers. "Weeeell," he drawled out happily. "I maaay have mentioned that I'd like to be able to buy up some land around my parents' old house, and invite some friends over to stay."

"And what does that translate into? Share!" she commanded, and since her fingers were both caught by his hands she brought up a toe to poke him with.

Desperate parents were rushing their children into floos in the background while Harry tried to transfer both her hands to one of his so he could have room open to catch that errant toe. "I can buy out the muggles who live in Godric's Hollow to convert it over to an all-wizarding town?"

She stopped poking, stunned beyond words, unable to move.

"Isn't Hogsmead the only all-magical village in Britain?" Hermione asked, now recovered herself.

"Well now there are two, or will be once I buy those muggles out," Harry told her smugly. "Shouldn't be too hard, I can pay far above market price, and I'm not in any hurry. I could just catch properties as they go on market. Being in a rush would only hurt things. Slower is actually better as far as taking advantage of my new rights. I want these to have been in force a long time before anyone thinks to challenge me on them."

Luna's mouth was hung open and her eyelids fluttering rapidly. She groaned and fell over backwards. Thankfully Harry, who still had her hands, caught her and lowered her gently down onto the grass.

Turning to Hermione, Harry finished his gloating, "At the same time I got them to grant me a 'one roof' concession stand to sell my goods at."

The bushy haired girl blinked. "The way you say 'one roof' sounds very important, but I don't know the significance."

He shrugged. "It's a standard measurement for commercial space. One roof means, or they THINK it means, one shop. A place like Ollivanders or Flourish and Blott's, both of those would be one roof shops."

She continued blinking in confusion. "I could see how that could be helpful, but you act like it's way more significant than I believe I am getting. What do you mean when you say, 'they think it means'?"

He grinned triumphantly. "Why Hermione, have you never heard of shopping malls? Wizards can't get it through their heads how much sheer SPACE can be covered by one roof these days! I can make a shopping arcade bigger than Diagon Alley all put under one roof BEFORE any magical expansion charms!"

Harry chuckled. Oh yes, this had potential for abuse all over it. He couldn't wait to get started.

Inside, the magical lockdown began.

They watched in interested silence while waiting for Luna to recover. She did shortly into it, and they all watched together as people suddenly stuck to things and the sound turned off, then they witnessed those suits of armor everyone ignored begin to move about subduing people.

Sitting outside of the castle proper, looking in, they were mere spectators to this scene. Wanting to help, they knew if they did their own secrecy would be ruined. So they made what use of this they could by learning the castle's security setup for dealing with intruders.

Surprise was a terrible factor, but anything known could be countered. And the next time (for there would be a next time, they trusted) they would be prepared to counter everything they'd seen here.

Moments into their whispered discussion over what they might do to help free those people while not getting caught themselves, Harry got hit on the head by a trio of falling books.

Luna looked up and levitated the streeler before it landed and broke itself.

"Ow!" Harry muttered eloquently, thankful his helmet was on and had protected his head. Still, those falling books had packed quite a whallop!

Hermione already had one open, and was sucking in her bottom lip and grinning while she read the title page.

"What is it?" Harry asked, while Luna played with her streeler, bouncing it around in the air with her wand.

Grinning like mad now, Hermione turned the book around and wordlessly showed them the title page. "Reversing Obliviation. A Forgotten Art."

Harry scrambled to check out the other two books. Somehow tomes of the Headmaster's private library, the one he did NOT share, had gotten dumped out of his window on top of them.

Luna lifted up a book, and her eyebrows, then read aloud. "Exorcism, The Lightest Art. 101 Spells To Send The Dead To Their Reward And Free The Living From Their Hauntings."

Turning to her friends with an odd expression she surmised, "Just ten years ago the Ministry came out with a statement this art never existed, that only charlatans and fakes claimed it did." Then she smiled brilliantly. "But I can see why Dumbledore wouldn't want this out. After all, from what you tell us about a third of his spies are ghosts."

Puzzled by Harry's lack of reaction, both girls leaned closer to see what Harry was looking at, grinning as madly as he was. The title read, "My Finding of The Stone of Power, by Cadmus Peverell."

"Dumbledore CAN'T have wanted these books to get out!" Hermione declared, rearing back from the tome as if it would bite her. "Maybe this is some sort of trap?"

"Maybe," Harry grinned wildly at the cursing coming from five stories up out an open window and thumbing through a thick sheaf of pages of handwritten notes tucked in the back cover, the most recent of these in Dumbledore's own hand, "Or maybe he's just unlucky?"

Harry withdrew a heavy gold ring from his pocket, comparing the stone set in it with the one drawn in detail on the first page. They were identical. Luna's eyes went wide at the sight. "Salazar Slytherin once wore this ring and called it his own. But it appears the stone at least pre-dates him."

"Where did you get that?" his bushy friend demanded.

The boy only smiled mysteriously. "I found time before our last expedition out of the wards, on the jaunt before, to stop by a furniture store, a cave, and a hut. This was in the hut. I'll leave you to wonder about the others."

"Harry!" she admonished him sternly.

"Oh, alright," he relented, also reaching into his pocket to pull out a heavy gold locket set with enormous emeralds and carved with an elaborate S on the front.

"The Locket of Salazar Slytherin?" Luna breathed, feeling faint.

"Yes," Harry nodded, frowning. "Except, it's a fake. I don't know where the real one got off to. But I know who took it and left this in its place as he was arrogant enough to leave a note claiming responsibility; and I intend to find out what he did with the original."

"This was in the cave?" Luna breathed, still impressed. She might never see the original, most people didn't, so she was drinking in the sight of the fake as it might as close as she'd ever get. Swiftly she transfigured a glass cage to put the streeler in so she could focus attention on the locket.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Guarded by about two thousand zombies."

"What did you do with the zombies?" Hermione was almost afraid to ask.

The boy gave off an unconcerned shrug. "Put them to work clearing out the overgrown drainage ditches and irrigation canals on my property, why?"

The two girls stared at him, open-mouthed.

He chuckled. "Aw! Shucks, t'wern't nuthin." Seeing they were still gaping with him he grew less silly. "What? Those most famous for

using zombies are the voodoo cultists of the Caribbean. And what do they use them for? Cheap farm labor, mostly. They only get used as weapons when someone ticks their master off. You act like you'd rather they be out there trying to eat brains."

"It's just..." the Granger girl moistened her lips. "I thought you would've destroyed them. That's all."

"Maybe I will." He shrugged, unconcerned. "But I want those ditches cleared first. And then a whole heck of a lot of weeding done. Then the same thing is going to have to be done again next year. Farm upkeep is a whole lot of work, you know, and no way can I use trolls. They don't obey orders well enough."

"There is your reputation to consider," Luna softly reminded.

"True enough," Harry sighed. "Oh rats! It's going to take me FOREVER to replace them with enough golems!"

Sighing for a moment, he stood, shoving things into his pockets. "C'mon. Enough dawdling. Let's go set as many people as we can free before Dumbles gets around to turning them all into slaves, or whatever he's going to do. Can either of you wordlessly cast?"

Getting two shaking heads by way of reply, he nodded. "Okay, we'll work on that. For now, just free everyone you can casting in through windows. First vanish the glass, then cast unsticking charms on the people, then levitate them out. The spell for levitating people is 'Levicorpus', same movements as the Wingardium Leviosar. Alright?"

"Shouldn't it be impossible to vanish the glass?" Hermione didn't mean to disagree, but she had to ask. After all, it seemed so obvious.

"You'd like you think so, wouldn't you?" He teased back. "Normally, yes. It would be. However I believe I've told you how most of the wards had been converted over to an information network? Ward stones can only sustain so many spells, no matter what runic amplifiers you've got on them. Protection stuff has largely gotten pushed into inactivity to make room for more of the information gathering spells he likes. So most of Hogwarts is not quite as safe as

he'd like us to believe. There are exceptions, of course. Anyplace he wants defended IS defended, quite rigorously. But most of the school is fairly open to attacks at present."

"What do we do about the armor? What if it interferes?" Luna hazarded to ask, raising both brows imperiously.

"Remind me at some future point to give you both a lecture on direct versus indirect casting and the comparative values of each," Harry started vanishing glass. Two suits of armor responded immediately and with a flick of his wrist he wrapped them both in summoned tapestries, rendering the suits bound and immobile. "They appear to be strongly resistant to most direct spells, so cast spells on their environment to disable them," he quipped good naturedly.

Smiling, both girls set to work, Hermione causing some vines growing nearby to fly over and bind some additional suits of armor, while Luna reached into her pockets for a large bag of gumdrops, and spent her time flinging those into the paths of onrushing suits, then enlarging them just as the animated armors passed over, trapping the guardians as silvery centers in multicolor gumdrops, and causing Harry to resolve to carry that as his sweet of choice.

Harry grabbed the arm of Oliver Wood, who'd been among the people just summoned out of the castle. "Wood! Go down to the Quidditch Pitch, to the broom shed. Bring back all the brooms, not just our team ones, the school brooms, even the Slytherin ones - anything that can fly. Then bring them back here right away, alright?"

"But why?" the Keeper paused in confusion.

Still holding his arm, Harry pointed back to the castle. "The floors in there are too sticky to walk on. So we'll have to fly over them if we want to rescue everyone! Also," he pointed upwards. "The Gryffindor and Ravenclaw dorms are in towers. If we fly up there and vanish the glass, we can begin saving the people trapped up there. Now go!"

He gave his team captain a little shove and Oliver took off running, Katie Bell, also newly rescued, not far behind him, with her parents following after. Good - that many more arms to carry brooms in.

"Percy!" Harry also grabbed the newly rescued Head Boy by the arm. "Go tell Hagrid to hitch up the thestrals. Then get the older years organized casting featherweight and floating charms on the carriages. Thestrals can already fly, all the carriages have got to do it Not Fall so they can be pulled through the air behind them. They've got enough of them to carry all the students. They do it twice every year. Do that, and we've got our route out of here. The floos are all being blockaded by those suits of guardian armor and not many of the students can apparate."

"Harry," Hermione grew concerned. "While the carriages may be able to carry all the students, we've got so many parents here as well... I don't think they can hold everyone!"

"They can't." He agreed. "But no one ever made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little. We'll get out as many people as we can that way, pack them tight then use older kids on brooms to ride escort in case there are any problems. Others can make it out their own ways if they have to. Or maybe we can do it if we enlarge the carriages. For now, we concentrate on getting our people out of the castle. Susan? Filch?"

The recently rescued blonde Hufflepuff gave pleading eyes to Harry. "Harry, I heard your plans to rescue the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. But what about my House? Hanna is still in there! I heard her go back to her room for some things she'd forgotten there in the rush."

He smiled roguishly for her. "Don't worry. We won't leave any Puffs behind if we can save them. Now Filch," turning, he faced the caretaker, who'd walked out of the castle as casually as you please and stood waiting attentively for orders. As if that didn't make it obvious, he could see in her eyes that this was Bellatrix, and still unswervingly loyal to him.

"As Caretaker, the lockdown does not affect me," the disguised Death Eater informed him. "And I can order the armor around, but only one suit at a time and only while it is with me."

Harry did not pause to ask why the magic recognized her as Caretaker when she wasn't truly Filch. Questions like that could wait for later.

"Go back inside and start clearing a route to the Hufflepuff dormitories, the shortest route to the outside you can find," he commanded briskly. "Order the armor to follow you, one at a time, around corners out of sight and leave them there so the path is clear, then open all of the doors and grab all of the buckets you can find. Dump the buckets in their common room, enlarge them and get the Puffs and their parents to climb inside of them. After that, go around opening doors inside of the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor dormitories."

He knew she could wordlessly spellcast, so could be trusted with the enlarging.

Bellatrix/Filch nodded firmly and was already on her way back inside, wand out and summoning buckets from every closet in the castle even as Harry was turning back to face Susan, telling her, "We'll get our teams to double up on broomsticks and form a chain, levitating the buckets out from broom to broom down the line. Can I trust you to organize that?"

The pretty Puff reached up and kissed him before hopping off to organize her fellows, starting with other Hufflepuffs.

"Dobby?" Harry called.

"Yous is calling, Master Harry Potter sir?" the little elf appeared.

The Boy Who Lived bent down to speak with the elf on an equal level. "Dobby, the castle is in lockdown. Can you still move about inside without sticking to anything?"

The elf nodded so vigorously he ended up slapping himself with his ears. "Yes, Harry Potter, sir! Onlys, we canst be moving no body. Living creatures is not to be touched during lockdown, sir."

"Thank you," Harry gladly put a hand on the little elf's shoulder. "That's just what I wanted. Can you gather together my elves and get

them to move all of the luggage and student belongings out from there? Also," he breathed deep, grinning. "We're going to have a very big, very long outing and we need picnic lunches and dinners for everyone. So if you could gather enough food for, say, a week long field trip out of the Hogwarts pantries?"

"Yes, Harry Potter sir!" the elf raised a hand to snap his fingers and vanish, only to be stopped by Harry.

"One last thing. I'm going to need everything from the Come And Go Room. Can you get that for me?"

"Oh! Yes Harry Potter sir!" the elf bounced, snapped his fingers and vanished.

"Alright everyone, listen up!" Harry shouted, after casting a Sonorous charm on his throat. Stepping clear of the growing crowd he enlarged a rock into a platform to stand on so he could be seen clearly. "Many of you have not thought any further than getting out of here. Those of you who have can ignore me, but if your only thought so far was getting away from Dumbledore can I ask you where you intend to go? Most of us here are students, who need to continue our educations."

Transfiguring a stick of wood into a small billboard, Harry slapped a piece of parchment on it, then enlarged it so it was about nine feet across. "This is a transfer request to Beauxbatons! I got it earlier this year, and Madam Maxine agreed to take not only me, but any of my friends who wanted to go. Those of you who want to transfer, all you have to do is sign this scroll. Carriages to France will be flying out as soon as we can get them organized, and I have already made arrangements to move your luggage for you."

Harry then turned and signed the scroll himself. Hermione and Luna pressed in almost as soon as he did, and shortly thereafter the board was mobbed.

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Author's Notes:

I love thinking heroes. They deal with crises so well!

Chapter Thirty-Four by Lionheart

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Sorry to disappoint, but Harry doesn't always get what he plans. I didn't mean to give a false impression, but the plot's not done twisting on itself.

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"This is a bad plan," Harry groused aloud to himself.

"No, it isn't. Don't be so hard on yourself, Harry. I think it's wonderful."

The boy looked over to catch a glimpse of Hermione, who'd spoken. She was roughly two hundred yards away, flying in formation with him, taking the left flank while Luna took his right. The three were in their fey forms because of Luna's discovery that their senses were keener and sharper in it. All three were mounted on dragons, and far enough away from the main group so that nobody saw their changes. He had taken the Chinese Fireball, Luna was riding the Swedish Short-Snout, while Hermione was on the Antipodean Opaleye.

The trio of young dragonriders were flying higher than, and slightly behind, the long troupe of Hogwarts carriages drawn through the sky by winged horses, positioned there as a reaction force so they could bring down their fiery mounts in a spear of flaming breath on any potential attackers. Broom mounted wizards provided close support, darting in and among the carriages, and sometimes taking messages back and forth between occupants.

There were even a handful of adult witches and wizards riding on top of the carriages, in the drivers' seats which were usually unoccupied, there in case a few spells were needed to drive off any attackers. Dusk had set, and lights within those carriages glittered, while occasional snatches of conversations or the clink of tableware and glasses showed they were generally having a high time, feeling this an adventure now they felt they were out of danger.

A low fog had even developed, shielding them from view by the ground.

"I have to agree with Hermione, Harry. The formation you've thought up is wonderful, and I am very impressed with how fast you worked this out." Luna added her voice in praise.

They could hear each other in spite of the wind and distance because of charms he'd cast before leaving the ground - and wished he'd done for all of the broom riders and carriage drivers as well. But it had been a last minute addition thought up right as these last three were taking off.

His mind had been too busy with other details to think of it earlier.

"For a flying column carrying mostly passengers, it's alright," he admitted. "But this was the wrong approach to start with. None of these people are combatants. I may have positioned them right, but none of them could stop a determined attacker. It's like a perfect US football formation filled up with nine year olds faced up against professional players. No matter that I've put everyone in the best slots to use them, none of them stand a chance. All of the aurors and professional combat types went with Albus. I don't know that we have ten people among everyone we've got here who can throw a decent shield and a stunner. Can you two?"

He got an embarrassed silence by way of answer.

"That's our problem," he complained. "A formation that works for a battalion of tanks isn't going to help a bunch of delivery trucks going up against tanks. This was the wrong type of escape plan to use."

"We've got our dragons," Hermione tried to be encouraging.

"That are so small we had to cast featherweight charms on ourselves to ride them. Otherwise they couldn't bear our weight," he reminded. There was a reason he'd kept his broom stuffed in a newly transfigured leg sheath so he could keep it with him, rather than put one more rider out there on a broom. If their dragons fatigued, and

someone fell off, he could rescue them - even if that someone was himself.

He sighed. "And they are young enough to not have a useful degree of the typical draconic spell resistance that makes the race so famous. Fully grown dragons take dozens of wizards to defeat, as they slew off spells like water off a duck's back. These? One determined auror could take them out."

"Well, what were we supposed to have done?" Hermione challenged. "You did a brilliant bit of organization and planning, Harry, especially given how very little time you had for pulling it off. It's not your fault you don't have combat teams to guard us with. You used what you had!"

"An appearance of strength is often as good as the strength itself," Luna threw in a tentative bit of support on Hermione's side.

"That may be," he conceded. "I hope it is."

"Why are you so upset?" Hermione wanted to know.

"Because if I'd been using my brain we would've been there by now," he beat himself up verbally. "Flying was the wrong decision. I made it after I'd already gotten on the track thinking of flying through the castle halls to rescue our people. What we should have done was go down to Hogsmead, floo everyone to the South of England, and taken ferries or the chunnel across to France! One more trip by floo and we all would've been in bed at Beauxbatons by now!"

By now he'd reach full tirade. "It all comes down to TIME! Thestrals scarcely travel much faster than the Hogwarts train, and that takes eight hours to go from London to Hogwarts. That's more than enough time for people to notice we are missing, find the carriages are too, put them both together and start searching for us. A simple 'Point Me' charm tells them where we are, and then they've got shops full of brooms and all the aurors in England to bring us down! Brooms are at least twice as fast as horses, so they'll be able to floo ahead of us, fly up, catch us and capture us. I wasn't thinking!"

Both girls were silent for a time.

"Is there any way to fix the problem?" Hermione asked at last.

"None that I can think of, and I've been wracking my brain for hours now," he admitted rather sadly. "Halting this column once it got started would've been worse than letting it continue. The moment we were clear of Hogwarts there was no safe place to land so large and obviously magical a group. And, as a great general once said: A good plan implemented now is far superior to a perfect plan too late. And we had to get out of there as fast as we could, because we had no idea when Dumbles or any of his cronies were returning."

"We'll be across the Channel in another hour," Luna declared. "If they are clever enough to do as you say, they are running out of time to do so."

"And we can rest our mounts on the other side," soft-hearted Hermione reassured, and he could somehow picture her patting her dragon on its flank or shoulder. "Poor dears aren't used to long flights like this."

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About the only thing good about it was that it got caught as criminal.

The aurors had not been thinking on their own, nor had Albus been available to direct them most of the time. So it was some while after putting down the revolt that he came back from doing necessary business at the Ministry and down out of his office, and noted the school was suspiciously silent.

The aurors that had been sent to Hogwarts had been told to make sure that everyone there got Obliviated, then to move on to doing the same to the rest of England. In no part of their orders were they told to report that no people had been there to Obliviate, so they'd just moved on.

But as he came down Albus couldn't help noticing that his school had neither faculty nor students. It had been too much to hope for that he

wouldn't notice at all, or that he wouldn't notify the aurors who were still under his compulsions.

However, it had been his bad luck to have been busy so long that he could not retrieve them without a major effort.

What Dumbledore's bad luck had granted them was a delay, enough delay so that the train of flying carriages were over central France by the time he appeared with every British auror in tow, having followed exactly the plan Harry wished he'd used. The first those in the air knew what was going on, their horses had diverted toward the ground and no one could get them back on course.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts had grand authority of things belonging to the castle, and that extended to trained service animals who worked under charms to ensure their obedience.

The Thestrals brought those carriages down in the midst of Britain's entire auror force, with Obliviators standing by. Those on brooms were brought down by more aurors on brooms.

"All we're going to do is WATCH?!" Hermione shrieked from their high altitude holding pattern.

Harry was watching this mess through a field glass. "They have every auror in England down there, Hermione. Merlin himself couldn't stand against that force; not alone. If they all cast tickling charms and three quarters of them missed they could still blow through the strongest shield I can raise. And don't forget, they've got Dumbledore there in person. He's one of the few I'd say could face a full-grown mature dragon, which none of us have got."

She watched, sickened, as a Ravenclaw Quidditch player dodged left when he should have dodged right, or just plain run away as some had done, and the spell that hit him flung him off his broom. She couldn't tell if his fall had been arrested or not.

"Can I borrow your telescope, Harry?" Luna requested.

"It's called a field glass, and there is one in your safari equipment," he told her, still watching the swarm of aurors do battle with students below.

"Why would you want to watch that... that.. slaughter!!" Hermione made a face.

"Because it is happening on the French Minister of Magic's lawn," Luna told her firmly, pulling out her spyglass. "And by the looks of all the horrified people gazing out of his windows on this, I'd say he'd been having a party."

Hermione started scrambling for her own field glass.

"Oh, this isn't going to end well," Harry surmised.

"What?!" Hermione desperately wanted her glass to get a closer look.

"Well, two things," he answered. "The French aren't going to be able to bring in enough aurors to stop Albus from making his escape with all those newly captured and Obliviated students and their parents."

"How can you tell? They've got to have a emergency alarm or something, right?" she found her glass, but in her haste it got an edge caught on a bunch of live capture animal traps and it was tough working it out.

"Not to bring all of them in one place. That'd cause more problems than it would fix most of the time, they are spread out for a reason: to provide coverage and control crime. And less than all wouldn't be enough because the British concentrated here could overpower them. They've got enough men under arms down there to qualify as an invasion army. But that only brings up the second reason why they won't be able to stop this," Harry quipped.

"What is that?" By this time Hermione had her telescope up to her eye and was looking through it, wishing she could make sense of the chaos below the way it seemed Harry could.

Luna answered for him. "Because security for international affairs is always tricky, and it looks like the French Minister was having a dinner party for the International Confederation of Wizards representatives. The men they have on hand could do nothing against Dumbledore's force, and a rush of new French reinforcements would alarm all of the independent security details and grant France a black eye almost as bad as Dumbledore is giving himself."

"Oh." Hermione grunted, seeing diplomats surrounded by bodyguards hastily escaping through floos in the mansion. "No, that can't end well."

"More unlucky for Dumbledore even than letting us get away, I think," Luna smirked. "Having gotten caught like this."

Harry smiled. "C'mon, let's get back to Hogwarts. We'll land, and I'll hand over our transfer paper to the French Minister, or whichever of his staff I can talk to, proving that Dumbledore just kidnapped a few hundred students enrolled at Beauxbatons. Then we'll take a floo trip or two ourselves. We'll shrink our dragons. But there's something back at Hogwarts that I just have to do!"

Such was the strength of his grin the two girls followed him without question.

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"I can't believe you were so careless!" Snape hissed, following Dumbledore into the halls of Hogwarts as the aurors behind them sorted everything out with restoring the faculty, kids and parents to where they ought to be.

"Sadly, carelessness had nothing to do with it, Severus."

The condescending tone of that reply did not go over well with the Potions Master. "So you **CHOSE** to commit an act of war in front of the eyes of the International Confederation?" Snape sneered, disbelieving.

"I chose to commit a risky venture." Dumbledore returned in a less patient tone, getting frustrated with his servant's bile. "Sadly, one of the effects of malaclaw venom is to cloud judgment. One cannot suffer unfortunate affairs if one takes no risks, after all."

In spite of the dread nature of this emergency, the twinkling was back full force, as was the grandfatherly smile.

"Bah!" Snape sneered. "If..."

"Severus," the Headmaster cut him off. "As powerful as it is, this venom can only exploit chances that exist. You cannot suffer a heart attack if you are not at risk, for example. For another, you could not get pregnant if you are not a woman. Nor could you lose a bet you never made. The luck can only exploit random chance when there is some degree of randomness involved!"

Dumbledore waved to indicate the stone halls around them. "This castle, for example. It's wards notify me promptly when there is violence or panic in its halls, most especially that caused by uninvited strangers. There is no degree of chance there. I was aware of it the moment you revived me this morning. Similarly, the wards are ancient, and have not been used to stop an invasion in a very long time. Their secrets have been very well kept, with particulars modified by every headmaster, so asking for someone to be on their guard against what they could not have known about was impossible. There was no random chance there. The invaders had no chance at all. What surprises me was that my luck was bad enough putting down the insurrection took entire minutes, when it should have been over in mere seconds. It took a hundred times as long as it should've - a powerful perversion of luck indeed!"

They turned a corner together. "I have made sure for many decades that I had sole control of the wards over the Ministry for the same reason I have here - security, the ability to overcome my foes by force when needed. And there as here, there was no amount of luck involved. Once more I reiterate, Severus: it is only a skewing of probability. Not the most powerful dosage of Liquid Luck could cause gold to materialize out of the sky and fall into your pockets. But if there was a chance someone might spill some coins on the street

before you, they likely would. Where there is no chance of something happening, not all the luck in the world, good or bad, will cause it to."

"And yet you nearly lost the vote there," Snape sneered. He was good at it.

"A remarkable turn of fate," Dumbledore agreed. "When you consider that the last vote to remove a Wizengamot Head took five days, and the record on the fastest such vote ever was a full nine hours. It was amazing that in the span of one half hour they had come so close, when over half the offices necessary to hold or even propose such a vote are held solely by myself. It took an amazing number of coincidences, large numbers of people suddenly recalling obscure codes and rulings - in one case a man who'd glanced over an old law book, then not thought of its contents for one hundred years, had it suddenly spring to mind in time to foil one of my protections. And some of the others recalling work-arounds to bypass my otherwise necessary offices were no less remarkable. No, I find myself astonished most of all by the power of this bad luck in how suddenly and completely our government was working efficiently at last - when I have striven for years to ensure that it could not function without me at all. And my delay in reaching those halls was also entirely a product of bad luck. There ought to have been no delay at all."

"Yet you conduct war operations on the French Minister's lawn," the oily professor snapped in biting tones.

"As I said, the venom inspires poor judgment to have opportunities to exploit. I must say, in my almost two hundred years of life I have conducted over a thousand similar operations and never been caught. The scale of this one was unusual and the consequences regrettable, but a complete coverup would've been impossible had most of our students and staff escaped. So I had to take a risk, and with my current luck the results went bad. Nothing more."

"When bad, he says." Snape shook his head, disbelieving.

"Severus!" Dumbledore rebuked him sharply. "I will not have you needling me like I was one of your students! I took a calculated risk on measured odds, in a field I am quite familiar with. I daresay you

would not have done half so well had it been YOU saddled with the operation, with luck so bad!"

"And I fail to see, Headmaster, how it could be any worse!"

"Crucio!"

After Snape had screamed and writhed for several seconds, Dumbledore released the spell and asked calmly, "I asked you to keep a civil tongue in your head, and you refused me. Will you do better this time?"

Spasming badly on the floor, blood filling and spilling from his mouth, Snape nodded fearfully. Voldemort's pain curses had nothing on Dumbledore's.

"Good," back was the grandfatherly tone and smile. "In my defense, Severus, it was an easy mistake to make. I located our fugitives, plotted their course and speed, consulted maps and brought them down in a low population zone in an area clear of buildings, all on very short notice. The operation itself went splendidly, recapturing close enough to all of our wayward staff and students to allow us to pretend those no longer with us left for innocent reasons. But the French government is no more in the habit than ours of marking on maps given out to foreigners, 'our head honcho lives here'. Having never traveled there by anything but floo I did not mark the location either. I saw an open lawn ideal for our operations, assumed it to be a park, and that any muggle witnesses could be easily Obliviated. As I said, I've done countless similar operations. My luck on this one has just been singularly foul."

Having turned a handkerchief red spitting blood out of his mouth, Severus once more resumed walking alongside the Headmaster, although at a reduced pace. He chose his words carefully. "I'm sorry, Headmaster. Can anything be done to minimize the damage?"

"Of course, Severus! Of course." Dumbledore was almost laughing. "One of the oldest strategies in government: provide a scapegoat and blame him! I will provide you with an evening off and the correct artifacts, and you will revive Lord Voldemort. Then I will send a letter

of apology to all of the ICW Heads that the attack was done by him, layered with a subtle Confundus Charm so they will believe that to be true in spite of being eyewitnesses otherwise."

Leery now of disagreeing too openly, Snape asked, "What of the Dark Lord? Once he's returned, will he not cause complications?"

"Better the enemy you know, Severus. Voldemort has always been more tool than threat to me, despite his intentions otherwise. I can contain him. I even find him useful, particularly when I need a distraction to focus attention elsewhere." The old man smiled winningly.

The pair then turned another corner and started down what was to have been a set of stairs on their way to the dungeons, only for the supports to give out under their weight, turning it into a slide. The landing below turned out to have been a painted dropcloth made to resemble floor, but instead covered up the mouth to a large muggle device.

An industrial sized plastic shredder, to be precise, one used in recycling, and whose toothed gears were able to grind to fine powder such hard plastics as used in lawn furniture and other durable goods.

Bone proved no obstacle to those toothed gears, once magic activated them the instant two human bodies fell into the hopper. Snape and Dumbledore got sprayed into the holding tanks as a fine, red, muddy mist.

Once spells on the tank registered the gears had stopped moving, having run out of material to pulverize, it automatically flushed its contents into a large bag, which sealed and shrank itself magically. Then the owl that had been waiting nearby took this parcel and delivered it to a large commercial fish hatchery where it got added to blood and offal shipped in by slaughterhouses, to be mixed with other ingredients, turned into feed, and fed to the fishes that were being raised in large pools there.

Having gotten its only approved targets, the industrial shredder also shrank, and got shipped by owl back to the scrap heap on which it

had been found, having worn out its engine, and teeth no longer sharp enough to be efficient.

However, when a small force of playing card people tried to force their way into the secret chamber containing their horcruxes, the attack had to be called off when the first two through evaporated going under the door.

A much more modern anti-vermin ward apparently protected the horcrux room from the entry of small magical creatures.

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Madam Pince was in the library, having recently been returned and forcefully Obliviated. She'd just glanced at a calender and was wondering where the day had gone. None of the work she'd planned to get done that day had happened, and books due that morning had not been returned...

As quick as that her train of thought ground to a halt. Her eyes flashed gold, then red, and the woman started off like a sleepwalker, moving purposefully but not thinking about what she was doing, her actions programmed.

Wards set for information can be programmed with responses for when they notice certain things, like the Headmaster and his pet dark wizard both dead at the same time, so they could no longer revive each other.

Those responses can be to activate a sleeper agent that had been prepared ahead of time with coercions and compulsions, along with mind magics, into doing something in response to what those wards detected.

The Hogwarts librarian was one of many such agents, unaware she had been prepared by Albus to take over the revival rituals for himself and Snape if they both fell dead - Sleepwalking spells can be programmed for more than just exercise, and sleep can be induced through spells, while suggestions can be layered into a person via the mind arts to activate only during a certain kind of sleep caused by a

certain kind of spell, cast only on the wards noting that two particular people were both dead at the same time.

Poor Madam Pince was not even aware she'd been programmed. Nor was she the only one, just the one that came up on that rotation.

The Hogwarts librarian entered a certain chamber and made a certain sign. Wards confirmed her to be the one sent for, that both principles it cared for were still dead, and that the woman was still unaware and under compulsion.

Were any of those not true, or were she not alone, the woman would've been atomized. As it was, her program got updated, implanted with sensitive data that had not been in her head before then, so as not to risk even the most skilled search being able to find it out. That information allowed her passage through the wards guarding the soul chamber, wards that updated as soon as she'd passed so the next one trying to use those codes would be obliterated.

Once there she followed the ritual to embody the two men exactly as it had been programmed within her.

Lacking bodies to revive, she began reaching into canopic jars where both men had previously stored dried and powdered blood of theirs, then skin samples out of the next bottles, hair and finally bone, all carefully stored in this room beforehand against this kind of need.

It was a longer and more involved ritual, lacking bodies, but could still be done. There were even wax simulacra, already placed there for this purpose. Dumbledore had spared no effort or expense to make sure this worked.

Unfortunately for Albus, they'd run out of mandrake earlier that day, and it was rather more critical for this extended ritual than for the one involving bodies. Still, sleepwalkers will do what they are told to do, even if that is to measure out a few cups worth of a substance from an empty jug. Being sleepwalkers, they just go through the motions as though it had been full.

Had Snape been there, he would've compensated as best he could. A little more of this, a touch of that, and so on.

But, for lack of a nail a horseshoe was lost, and all that.

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Author's Notes:

Dumbledore is a PLANNING villain! He is an information specialist. Thinking ahead, plotting things through and preparing for contingencies is his schtick! He spends countless hours working plans over and plugging up holes. He has very thoroughly thought through such possible events as, "What if Severus and I both die at the same time?" and plotted reactions and contingencies to deal with them. And not just once, but Several Layers Deep!!

And, until very recently, he had portraits of countless previous headmasters to bounce ideas off of and refine all of his plans, including asking them, "How would you break this?" and then acting to counter that before it could even happen. And he had both the sneaky, the methodical, and the bold advising him, as well as geniuses to help him work out proper responses.

Note that even though malaclaw venom is NEVER used in the show, he STILL had plenty of antidote to it, on hand, waiting to be used!

Such things as control of the magical world have so many variables that it is possible to outflank him a bit, catch him off guard, or otherwise sink a few of his plans. It's too big a field to cover everything in detail all at once, so he can take losses there in spite of his great degree of control.

However, on so simple a matter as making sure the horcruxes get used when they need to be used... there aren't many points he hasn't got covered. All of the staff have gotten subliminal programming to help him there, for one, because he's had the time and opportunity and paranoia to set that up.

Did no one ever wonder why Old Mad Eye was his best friend?

Chapter Thirty-Five
by Lionheart

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"I am tired of being killed at some Dark Muggle's WHIMS, Severus!" APBW Dumbledore spat as he was hauling his misshapen body out of the cauldron.

"As am I, Headmaster. As am I."

Severus Snape did not look so good. One of his eyes had migrated up to his forehead, his ears hung too low and neither were even with the other, and his chin now looped up to a point that almost touched his now exceptionally long nose - the effect of being liquefied then brought back without mandrake had left him looking like a partially melted wax figure of a human.

Dumbledore, however, how not gotten off so easily. He'd already been through three failed resurrection attempts before this latest debacle, and the results on him were much worse.

The Headmaster was grossly humpbacked from where fallen beams had crushed him in the Prophet building. From the same source, half of his face had been crushed and never properly reformed, granting him a perpetual half leer and an uncontrollable trail of drool out of one corner of his mouth. The overall effect was quite gruesome, but made worse that during one of those failed attempts to revive him he'd lost fine motor control in one half of his body, leaving him to lurch and stumble about.

He also had that 'partially melted wax figure of a human' appearance. Among other flaws, his arms were different lengths from each other, as were his legs (and one of his knees faced to the side). Also, his beard had somehow migrated up off his chin and now covered his entire face, partially obscuring his eyes, one of which was smaller and didn't quite track with the other.

Stereotypes were very unfair, and for the most part inaccurate, but the common perception was still to view handsome people as good,

and ugly people as bad, and while before Dumbledore had lived a life of regal good looks, now he could put Igor, famed servant of mad scientists, to shame.

Igor would probably be jealous.

Dumbledore no sooner lurched out of the cauldron and had taken up his wand than he first Obliviated Madam Pince and sent her on her way, then set about performing transfiguration on himself to correct most of the errors. Alas, it was only a temporary cure.

Using human transfiguration to correct the latest set of problems was at best a mediocre solution. Even if every detail could be gotten exactly right, which it couldn't do as humans were beings of infinite complexity, they were still only a 'Finite Incantium' from ringing bells at Notre Dame.

Even so, they would still be as badly misshapen as hags by the time they'd corrected all of the major structural faults of their current bodies. They'd be forced to claim some of their supply of previously stored hairs to charge polyjuice so it could take them back to resemble their previous forms for all of the fine details.

These were patches, good for the short term only. More permanent solutions would have to be sought later on. It would not do to have the Great Albus Dumbledore revert in public to less than his customary perfect good looks. Nor could he dwell in seclusion. He could not control the world as a hermit. Too many powerful office holders required the personal touch.

As Dumbledore drew out his wand, Snape stared, pointing at it with a knobby finger. "Isn't that the same wand you used before? Wasn't it ground up?"

The Headmaster smiled, an expression made grotesque by how badly it fit on his currently distorted features, and spoke as if instructing a child, "Strictly muggle methods of destruction cannot be used to permanently harm any of the great magical treasures, Severus. Only powerful magic will suffice. So yes, my wand is fine. I

have a box here that summons it automatically when I am alive without it in my possession."

That spell had been cast with the Elder Wand itself, back when it still bowed to him as its true master.

Nodding, Snape accepted this, going to another box for yet another spare wand, having already lost count of how many of those he'd gone through himself lately and wishing he had something like the Headmaster's wand.

The Headmaster himself was rather disappointed in his wand's performance. The Elder Wand was an ancient artifact and unmatched in performance, but it only ever served one master at a time with its full potential. That master was whoever had defeated its last one, and Dumbledore had to admit that he had been defeated quite a number of times recently.

That made it all that much more important for him to go find and destroy this Colonel Sanders. For a muggle Dark Lord to be master of the most powerful wand in history was an outrage of the greatest magnitude!

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The trio of students spun back another day.

"Unfortunately, we're going to have to stop doing this," Harry announced to his two companions.

"Why is that?" Luna looked at him, dreamily puzzled.

He shrugged. "It's no longer safe. There are supposedly no Time Turners left in England, and Dumbledore confiscated the ones he knew about. So not only are we going to set off alarms if we appear in more than one place where he can monitor us, but if he ever does note us being in two places at once, he is going to first: know that we shouldn't be, and second: want the tools we use to do it for himself. And since we don't want him time traveling out of some of the messes we've worked up for him, we don't dare get caught."

Hermione frowned at him. "Harry!" she admonished. "Don't think I've learned nothing from watching you plot since school started. The time meddling came about mostly because we need to keep Dumbles 'under fire', or else he would retake the initiative and destroy us, and that need hasn't gone away. It's just as much in force as before. Dumbledore has every resource at his command. We only have surprise. So it's vital to milk our initial window of opportunity for smacking him in the metaphorical nuts, then hitting him when he is down, over as long and as heavy a period as our skills allow!"

Harry pretended to wipe away a tear (it was of laughter) while Luna put her hand on his shoulder, congratulating, "You must be so proud!"

He went over to hug the Granger girl. "Oh, Hermione! I've been SUCH a bad influence on you! I couldn't be HAPPIER!!"

"Alright, alright." She patted his head as he pretended to cry into her shoulder.

Harry kissed her on the cheek, then withdrew to adopt a 'solemn, old wise guy' pose. "Ahh, Grasshopper. You have learned much! Now is time for next lesson, called 'Strike and Fade'. When facing superior opponent, is good to kick in nuts then smack when down. But when he wake he angry! Raging bear would destroy all opponent. So best defense: No Be There!"

He dropped the pose, smiling. "Seriously, Hermione. You've stated a perfect strategy and you've learned it well. But sadly, that time has seemingly come to an end for the moment. We got some good hits in, but now he's no longer asleep. He's up and in arms, on his guard and spoiling for a fight, with all the aurors in England at the ready under his compulsion. We could get a few more licks in if we were lucky; but he's looking for it, watching for the next time he takes a blow and wanting to catch the ones doing it. We could hit him a couple more times, but we'd get caught. That's not worth it. Best move right now is to slink off and lay low for a while. Quit while we're ahead. It's always very tempting to take 'just one more shot', but that's how you get discovered."

Harry put his wand behind his ear and cracked open a book. "Right now he is tense, aware he's in combat, and that makes him watchful and on guard. So we'll catch some rest and recuperation. He can't keep all those aurors under compulsion forever, because they do a terrible job for however long he does. So problems are going to mount and he'll have to release them so they can go back to thinking again. Until he does that, we'll catch our second wind."

Hermione's eyes were shining. "So, to make sure I understand you, while he is ready, waiting for us to attack, we stay quiet. Then, to carry that forward, the moment he expects this to stay quiet?"

"We attack," Luna agreed, with her own wicked grin.

"Fairly standard method of waging war by a group of insurgents like us," the boy proclaimed. "Classic 'hit em where they ain't' strategy backed up by a 'don't be where they're looking' defense. We can afford to hide out right under his nose until he drops his guard again, but we've got to be real quiet while doing so."

"I disagree," Luna stated promptly.

Both the boy's eyebrows went up.

She gave him an otherworldly smile. "This is a perfect opportunity to catch up on one of our most galling weaknesses: our own personal abilities. We are no match for him. We may never be, but the closer we get to parity the less perfect every opportunity has to be."

"It'll take years to even approach his skill," Harry shook his head.

"Yes, but those years will never be over unless they start," she disagreed. "I am willing to devote free time to extra study and practice. Are you?"

That challenge was like waving a red flag before a bull for Hermione. Quickly she was up and siding with Luna.

Harry pretended grave remorse. Sighing, he declared, "Outmaneuvered once again. Okay, I was planning to spend this

extra day to snap some parting shots at Dumbledore under cover of the confusion, but instead we can use them to train."

"Oh no," Luna objected. "That's not what I meant at all. Back to your original point, about our time travels having to end? I disagree."

He shot her a more curious gaze, trying to understand. "But I told you we'll get caught if we do, and what happens if Dumbledore gets hold of one of our Time Turners is he'll be able to catch up on his own problems. That's bad!"

Luna patted his head condescendingly. "Where you go wrong, Harry, is by assuming we'll be caught. Alright, I admit, if we appear in two places in the castle he'll know we are time traveling. But why should we have to confine our efforts to the castle?"

Harry touched his head where she'd patted it. "Because after having all of his students and staff try to run out on him he'll make some excuse to cut off all outside contact for a while. Even though most people don't remember it, he'll make up some excuse just to be sure to catch any strays. He likes layered approaches like that."

"So we make up our own excuses to counter them," she replied reasonably. "If we were to, say, run laps around the lake every morning for our exercise, that goes far enough outside the castle wards without actually leaving the Hogwarts grounds, don't you think? Then later if we were to join Hagrid on those little trips of his out to see his animals, that would get us out into the Forbidden Forest, would it not? Then we could use both those occasions to slip away, even if just for a second, and time turn. Couldn't we?"

"It could," Harry allowed, recalling previous ward patterns and assuming that any new protections would be the same. "If done carefully."

"The next thing to do," Hermione interjected briskly, "Would be to decide how to spend our extra time, since we no longer need it for official lessons."

"Or assault missions," Luna added with a smirk.

Hermione had frozen, spending a second pondering a sudden, disturbing thought. "Harry, where do you get your tactical knowledge from?"

"From Voldemort." He was about to explain further, when she cut him off.

"Didn't he LOSE the last war?" she interjected rather quickly.

"I..." Harry opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. "I see your point."

Luna, too, was frowning now. "I overheard Dumbledore on the microphone we planted boasting to Snape that he found Voldemort useful despite the dark lord's intentions otherwise - that he could contain him and viewed him as a tool and distraction, nothing more."

Harry was now frowning. "So, what do you suggest?"

Luna's face transformed into a bright smile. "Why, what would you think? If you know someone who'd lose the war would do one thing, try the opposite!"

"Increase the pressure," Hermione confirmed. "Kick it up a notch. You said yourself once that one of Dumbledore's greatest weaknesses was that he had to think through every possible angle of something before he could act. Giving a person like that breathing space only guarantees he'll be thinking on his problems - and one of them is how to deal with you. So, if that's what he wants to do, we ought to deny him any chance to do it, as best we can!"

Luna began nodding. "Keep him off balance. Deny him rest. Demand that he keep putting out small fires, and continually upset his plans. Never let him stop to think things over. If that is where his strength lies, always deny him chances to go there. Thinking requires time, so always keep him too busy. This isn't a war against the world so much as it against one man."

Hermione was now smiling brightly. "Exactly! I like to think myself, and so my quiet times when there are no distractions are precious to me. But this man controls so much of our world it ought to be easy to always be causing him problems SOMEWHERE! Nor can he defend it all at once! Or focus his attention everywhere, or even keep all of his servants busy doing the right things if he never has a chance to stop and examine the situation. Make his head spin!"

"I do feel much better about this plan, Harry," Luna told her fiancée.

"I agree," Hermione primly stated. "I know it would drive me bonkers to be on the receiving end of it. Besides, we're on a roll! We've already had so many successes our enemy is off-balance. All we have to do is keep him that way!"

Harry was nodding. "I bow to your wisdom. We'll increase the pace of attacks. That point you raised about Voldemort losing is chilling to me, because you're absolutely right; he did, and I was about to go the same way he would in this situation. So despite my instincts telling me to go one way, we'll do the alternate."

Luna was regarding him sorrowfully. "Due to your past I would say both sets of instincts are probably wrong about how to deal with this. Dumbledore had so mastered the Voldemort situation he views him almost as a play-toy, and the past of Harry Potter is of running away from bullies, or bowing down to accept their abuse. Both have the wrong sets of experiences for taking this dangerous foe down. Lessons they learned in their pasts do not apply here. Not if we want to succeed. Neither one could neutralize this enemy."

Hermione also endorsed this, "Speaking as the kind of person Dumbledore may once have been, a thinking person who loves knowledge, and who he may still be deep down, I know that increasing the rate of attacks would only drive me batty in short order. I'd hate it, were I in his place."

"Well, let's do it then!" Luna chirruped brightly.

"War is chaos," Harry found himself quoting his earlier words in a musing tone. Then he raised his head. "Too bad we don't have any

Americans. One of the German generals in WWII was also quoted as saying, 'War is chaos', but he followed it by the statement, 'That's why the Americans are so good at it, because they live chaos in their everyday lives'."

Luna's eyes had begun twinkling. "Well, I don't know about any Americans. But I know where we can get a hold of some Cornish pixies."

"They do chaos awfully well," Harry agreed, eyes wide.

Now Hermione was straining to hold in laughter. "I can do better than that. In fact, we've already got the perfect advisors for this war - Fred and George Weasley! All we have to do now is convince them Dumbledore is the enemy."

"The Masters of Mischief?" The Boy Who Lived raised his eyebrows. "I like the way you think, Hermione. Yes, I agree. I have to move beyond Moldyrot and pick up a better set of tactics than I inherited from Riddle." He smacked his lips. "And I really can't think of a better pair to learn from if I am to be discovering how to annoy and bedevil someone to death."

Luna began softly stroking his hair. "Harry, you are going to win, and that is because you have an abundance of a trait vulturewart never had: humility."

Hermione nodded vigorously. "No matter how smart the person, a willingness to take instruction and receive correction is necessary to their progress. It is something I've always had to keep in mind... although mostly I've applied it to listening to my teachers," she admitted with a deprecating grin.

"I love you both!" Harry blurted out, taking them both in hugs. "Here I have two of the most perfect girls on this planet, one an expert at thinking in the box, and the other outside of it. With BOTH of you, how can I go wrong?"

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Next step, as it was still quite early in the day and before the cover of chaos that could later shelter more sinister activities, they went to visit Lockhart where he was recovering.

The man was actually better than he was before Obliviating himself. Already his skills had surpassed his previous level and he was rising strongly toward the abilities everyone had always believed he'd had.

It was amazing what a bit of drive and dedication could do to a person. Seven years of formal education had taught Lockhart practically nothing. He'd been more than a bit like Ronald Weasley in that aspect, lazing away having as much fun as possible while avoiding every gram of study he could get out of.

Actually, the jealousy of other's achievements was bang on the dot as well. In fact, Harry reflected that it was a touch scary just how much Lockhart and Ronald Weasley were alike. They both loved fame while being too lazy to accomplish anything themselves, and were willing to attach themselves to anything that might bring them glory.

That last point they held in common with most Death Eaters.

As interesting as it was to explore the character flaws held in common by large and disparate sections of wizarding society, the point was there was hardly a spell Lockhart could do outside of his one narrow specialty before Harry had rebuilt his mind.

But now, with drive and dedication, he was picking up material fast to make up for lost time. It had only been a few days and his spell repetoir was nearly five times what it had once been; Not a patch on what it should be, or even needed to be, but appreciable progress all the same.

All to the better, as this man was rapidly becoming important to Harry's plans, and they needed him to be a leader, someone with experience that other wizards would follow into battle.

In other words, a counter-Voldemort, because Harry was going to be too busy countering Dumbledore to be able to oppose them both effectively. One Dark Lord was as much as he could handle, and

even then he'd be lucky to actually succeed in opposing him. Facing both by himself was just too much.

The experience they planned for Gilderoy to get by going out and doing some of those things he'd written books about. If he could survive that it would temper him and make him the kind of leader that could actually counter Tom Riddle, rather than merely pose and look good in front of cameras.

Although that last skill was something Harry was willing to admit he'd do well to pick up himself. The wizarding public adored Dumbledore in part because he was always careful to be there and available. He was approachable, which was rare in legendary figures, but gave him a stranglehold on the country's loyalties. Harry, while he might have been popular, was a mysterious figure that no one knew much of anything about. They might love him, but they gave him no loyalty, and that had to change. He'd accept Lockhart as his tutor for that. The man was used to being a celebrity and did it well.

While visiting Lockhart Harry made a stop in the long-term spell damaged ward and revived the Longbottoms, plus some other patients. This was important for several reasons. For one, it was the decent thing to do, and ought to go a long way toward making Neville happy. For another, it was the responsible thing to do, as he had the ability and they had need.

But the last and best reason was they were the next best thing to family he had left. Alice Longbottom was Harry's Godmother.

Harry had grown suspicious about that and done some looking. The story he'd been told was that Bellatrix and other serious Death Eaters had sought out the couple to torture them for Harry's location.

Well, why?

Why did they do that?

What reason did they have to suppose that those people in particular ought to have Harry's address? That wasn't being handed out to just anyone. In fact it was one of the best-kept secrets of the wizarding

world, up until Lucius Malfoy bought his pardon. After that, thanks to Lucius and other Death Eaters that occupied positions in every level of the Ministry, Harry Potter's address was anything but secret.

But BEFORE that happened, when the celebrations of Voldemort's fall were going on, there was no good reason for Death Eaters to seek out the couple of experienced Aurors unless those aurors had a perfect right to know that privileged and highly secret information.

So Harry had done some digging and discovered that Alice Longbottom was his Godmother - the person who had legal custody of him after his parents died and Sirius became ineligible.

To repeat an old phrase: once was bad luck, twice was coincidence, and three times was enemy action. Harry had lost his guardians three times in two days back then, leaving Dumbledore unopposed to decide his future. If he hadn't already known the Headmaster was out to get him, that was proof enough. Three times in two days Harry lost his guardians, and every time there was Dumbledore's influence hanging somewhere around the scene.

He'd been the one to convince his parents to go into hiding. He was the judge who let an innocent Sirius go to one of the worst prisons imaginable without even the most perfunctory show trial. And his Death Eater might well have whispered in the ears of other Death Eaters where to find the Longbottoms - in SPITE of the fact that couple was ALSO UNDER FIDELIUS!!

Both families were members of the same organization, facing the exact same risks, and went into hiding on the advice of the same man: their leader. It ought to have been obvious the same spells had been used to protect them when that was the best they had.

That both such protections had failed was just waaay too convenient for the Headmaster to have been accidental.

So Harry cured his Godmother and her husband (to the accompaniment of Luna's jokes that if he was a fairy, and she was his godmother, did that make her a fairy godmother? Hermione spent minutes in unhelpful giggles after that choice comment.)

Although it made him feel guilty to do it, Harry included the same loyalty imprints on Frank and Alice Longbottom that he had for Gilderoy Lockhart. It made him feel bad, but he felt it was necessary to do it, as both these people had been loyal to Dumbledore in the past and Harry couldn't allow possible guardians for himself to fall into the Headmaster's camp.

He may be Acting Head of the Black family, which came with emancipation. But Albus Dumbledore had pulled seemingly impossible stunts before, and it was best to leave no flank unguarded. He just didn't need to be a minor under the Master Manipulator's thumb anymore.

Besides, Frank and Alice were both aurors. Their help could go a long way toward assisting Lockhart in bringing up a new cadre of followers to counter Vulturewart's Death Eaters, and Harry didn't have many people he could rely on to do that.

While they were there, the trio visited Peter Pettigrew in the secure ward and Harry ripped the memories of his parents from the rat's mind.

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Author's Notes:

Probably got some spelling errors in this one. It wasn't important enough to stop and look up some of the more obscure words.

But I DO like to highlight that, though Harry inherited enormous knowledge, he is still far from perfect. He can still pick wrong strategies. Also this proves another point I'd been trying to make early on - that while Hermione may have started out behind, and thus required explanations, that girl learns FAST!! Already she just caught one of Harry's major blunders, in that he'd begun relying too much on those inherited skills.

Dumbledore is indeed a thinking enemy. But thought, especially careful thought, requires time. So the more of that he has, the more

dangerous he becomes. Hermione was able to pick this out, even when Harry wasn't.

Chapter Thirty-Six
by Lionheart

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"Harry, I thought you said slow was best for doing this?"

Harry chuckled. "And I thought you told me how my tactical knowledge was flawed? Perhaps it's time to be bold, like a Gryffindor, instead of sly like a snake - even if only for one day."

"Why only one day?" Her nose wrinkled in confusion.

Luna laughed with a sound like tinkling bells. "Hermione, perhaps you were a bit too accurate with your assumption that Dumbledore is like you in that you both need some quiet time in between emergencies to gather your thoughts. Don't you remember? We spun back, so this is the day the Prophet came out, so the wizarding world is in chaos."

While Hermione gaped an 'Oh' of realization, Harry nodded firmly. "So people who ought to be watching monitors in the Ministry aren't. Nobody has time for normal operations today, what with the Head of the Wizengamot invading those chambers and taking control of everyone in the Ministry by force. So if we sound a few alarms today... nobody will even notice."

Together they moved on to the next door.

Godric's Hollow was a small and sleepy village, a tiny hamlet not much more than a wide spot in a road, lost in the Greater English Countryside. Only a handful of magical families lived there, the rest were muggles who worked in a handful of shops. Too far from anything major to serve as a bedroom community, conditions too poor to make for good farming, it was one of those places where young people moved out of to find opportunity, and when aged moved back to for the peace and quiet. A sleepy retirement community of a hundred or so souls that remained virtually unchanged for centuries.

Harry was buying it all up in the space of about an hour, using a combination of Legilimency to find out people's reasons for living there and filling those as best he could elsewhere. Transplanting them in effect, using house elves to move muggle households nearly undisturbed, and conjured currency to pay them off with a little extra in all cases (actually quite generous. It didn't hurt him to conjure a hefty amount of padding to make their lives easier), and Confundus charms to help the moves go easier (letting the muggles believe they'd moved at a leisurely pace months ago. Or, they'd always lived here - in the new place).

In short, the muggles were all much better off after he'd moved them, with fewer bills, and just as content as before. A handful of other, similar sleepy retirement communities grew by a few households, and everyone forgot the muggle name of the wizarding town of Godric's Hollow.

Then it was time to set up charms to hide the area. Those were odd spells in that there both was and wasn't much call for them. On the one hand, most wizarding households had the basic set. The Weasley family home was not unusual in being obviously magical even from the outside, held up at crazy angles that only magic could sustain. Also, for the odd Quidditch stadium set up for large events, muggles had to be kept away.

But for large, permanent zones of 'muggles don't go here, and don't even realize it exists' there was not much call. A handful of muggle repelling wards and spells to make land unplotable served in most cases. Permanent land grabs, on the other hand, were comparatively rare. But, while the Ministry, which monitors those things, was going through an invasion by Dumbledore rushing through Obliviating everyone, it was the perfect time to do one.

Harry bought up everything he could in town, then for several miles in every direction to establish a buffer zone, then got to work.

Luckily, anti-muggle wards were among the most common in existence. Every student of warding started with them, as most magical households wanted them, and their businesses had to have them. So everyone who could cast the spells got plenty of practice

with them - and even young Tom Riddle had seen no end of use for them, so Harry knew those spells inside and out.

Useful, because there were only a handful of people who could ward an area that size, and most of them were unapproachable for one reason or another. They couldn't ask Dumbledore to do the work for them, after all!

"The biggest problem is going to be obtaining proper wardstones," Harry declared. "I can cast spells big enough to cover the area, but they won't sustain themselves, and it's going to be awkward getting out from under Dumble's nose often enough to recast these wards on a regular basis."

"Couldn't we make our own stones?" Hermione asked gently.

Harry sighed. "You two couldn't, as it's all NEWT level Arithmancy and Runes for the simplest of them, beyond that on to specialist grade training for the better ones. I could, because Voldemort got that level of training as part of learning how to break through wards as well as he does. But each stone is a ton of work, and I couldn't do many given the concentration required, and the amount of stuff I'm already committed to."

He chuckled. "It makes me wish I could rob the Ministry right about now."

"Oh?" Both his friends raised their eyebrows.

"Uh huh," he nodded. "There are two ways to use wardstones, the careful and efficient one, and then the way the Ministry uses them." Harry waved his wand to conjure some muggle blocks. "Here, these make a good metaphor. With children's blocks you have the same two general ways to build tall. You can either heap them together in a pile," with a wave of his wand he did so, making a small yet compact mound as if someone had dumped out a chest of blocks. "Or you can carefully arrange them into a cohesive shape."

Another wave of his wand and the blocks arranged themselves into a model skyscraper, which he pointed to. "This is the good way. It

functions, you get the most use out of every block, but it requires some forethought and skill. The wards around Hogwarts and Gringotts are done this way."

He chuckled. "But anyone who expects government to be efficient has never met it. And anyone who expects intelligent planning and rational behavior out of wizards doesn't know them. The wards around the Ministry started out like this," another gesture and most of the blocks vanished, leaving behind a small yet tidy structure. "But then they started adding on, and adding on, and someone needed a new department," with each phrase he added some more blocks to the existing structure, each one not quite fitting well with the last until it looked remarkably like the Weasley's Burrow.

The boy pointed to it. "But this isn't stable, and unlike houses you can't hold up an insane structure of spells using more spells, so it collapses," he waved his wand and the structure fell in on itself so the blocks were once again in an untidy pile. "Then everyone starts screaming about 'the emergency' of the wards failing, and before anyone has time to listen to an expert someone comes up with the grand idea of throwing more money at the problem - and that's ALWAYS government's favorite solution to every problem! So they buy a ton more ward stones to get things back up to where they were before."

One last wave of his wand, and a large number of blocks were added randomly atop the heap, making it taller, wider, yet more messy looking. Harry pointed to it with a grin. "This is the way the Ministry does their warding. It is neither efficient nor pretty, and requires a hundred times the ward stones of any other method for the same area covered, and it will always have more flaws. But they have money to burn and not a gram of sense on how to use it. So they add patches on top of patches on top of patches until this is what you get: an ugly, untidy, colossally expensive mess!"

He vanished the pile of blocks. "Besides, it gets somebody's cousin or uncle a ton of contracts for making more warding stones, and some of that money always gets lost along the way, sticking to the fingers of the government employees who sign the order forms."

Hermione saw through to his conclusion before he could state it. "But what it means to us is they have tons of this equipment heaped up there, top of the line everything as this IS government we're talking about, and..."

"With a little careful arrangement of what got left behind, they'd never miss enough to do our job here," Harry finished.

"Bollocks that!" Luna chirruped. "Let's just take it all! That way they get to happily deal with an emergency they can handle, some warding specialists get a well paying job, and it might upset Dumbledore! My grandmother can already bypass those wards there through those same flaws you mentioned. She'd lived there long enough to learn them intimately, after all."

The other two stared, amazed, as Luna hopped over to a nearby mirror and sprang inside of it to go ask her grandmother Alice for a favor - raiding the Ministry building again, this time taking the ward stones and runic amplifiers, and given those to the Fey Trio.

The remaining two were slack-jawed at her audacity.

As far as anyone in the wizarding world knew, someone stole the wards over the Ministry building on the same day as the Prophet Disaster, taking them entirely and leaving the heart of wizarding government helpless.

A nice, tidy emergency kept everyone focused, and Dumbledore tearing out the hair of his beard as a complete set of wards built up from scratch would not have the same weaknesses to prey upon, and he'd never been supposed to be solely in charge of the Ministry's wards - a precaution meant to stop exactly the kind of abusive behavior he'd just used them for.

Rebuilt new as a solid project rather than an infinite series of short-sighted expansions and adjustments, the Ministry's warding scheme would be sane and rational for a few generations - NOT something that it was easy to subvert unlawful control of!

That made blanking the minds of the Ministry again out of the question, as he could not risk an armed assault on an area whose wards he didn't control. It also made a high priority out of the difficult task of regaining that control.

On Harry's part, all sorts of Wonderland creatures began to deliver warding stones and runic amplifiers, all top of the line equipment as Hermione had guessed. Not about to look a gift horse in the mouth, Harry blanked out the previous programs of the ward stones and began setting them to support his own arrangement around Godric's Hollow, crafting the new scheme as best he knew how, including an awful lot of tricks vulturewart had picked up over the years he'd spent breaking through some of the best defended houses.

Even making it three layers deep, he had more wardstones and equipment delivered than he knew what to do with, so for now they just stored the rest.

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The Fey Trio had agreed to continue their previous scheme of 'three days for one' as being a schedule they already knew how to keep; and it allowed them plenty of time to keep up the pressure on Dumbledore while at the same time pursuing other interests.

One day for looking normal, or normal enough (they'd still be getting extra study done, seeing the need they were under), one day building themselves or their resources up, and one day to bedevil and bewilder Dumbledore for every normal day seemed an appropriate mix to them.

They'd already had what they considered to be the 'normal' day of this set just by hanging around Hogwarts, directing a mass exodus of the students, faculty and staff in an ultimately failed retreat from Britain.

Apparently, it was worse luck for Dumbledore to get caught red-handed by an international audience subduing his escaping students by force than it would have been for those same refugees to merely get away.

Still, they'd had their normal day, normal enough for their purposes anyway.

The second day was, sadly enough, spent entirely just getting Godric's Hollow devoid of muggles and properly warded. They hadn't even had time to install anything other than a proper ward scheme. The village itself, which they had grand plans for, consisted now of a handful of empty shops and homes. The few wizarding families would doubtless have noticed something wrong soon, except Harry had the brilliant idea of letting Hermione spend the time that he was using to set up those wards reading that book on reversing Obliviation that had fallen on them from Dumbledore's tower.

The magical world had never yet found a spell that girl couldn't learn to cast. By the time the aurors and Ministry Obliviators had come and gone (the trio had hidden so as not to be caught up in this blitz) she was ready, and simply reversed the Obliviation of all of those magical families in Godric's Hollow.

With their memories restored, those families were rightly terrified of their government. Two elected to move out of the country, and Harry helped out by providing house elves to pack their stuff, muggle passports, clothes and currency, and offering to buy their houses if they so desired (giving them cash to get set up in those new countries).

The other magical families elected to stay, but were of the right frames of mind NOT to go ratting out other people to the government, in light of how little that government seemed to care about its subjects.

That made them the perfect core for the kind of magical town Harry wanted to build. But they'd run out of time. The real building projects would have to wait. For right now it was enough that what they'd already achieved seemed safe, for the short term at least.

That made this the day for bewildering Dumbledore by seeing what new fires they could start that he'd be forced to put out.

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"The fun part about this," Harry spoke from the top of a combination harvester that was currently plowing through one of Dumbledore's fields, collecting grain and hay in the front, and with a rack of disks churning up the ground behind. "Is that this is fall - harvest time. But muggles harvest their crops early, getting food slightly unripe to maximize shelf life and durability. They call this 'shelf ripened'. But wizards harvest their crops later in the year to maximize flavor and nutritional value. This is called 'vine ripened'. So Dumbledore is a couple of weeks yet before noticing that the crops our world depends on him for have simply disappeared."

Luna was still examining the muggle contraption they were riding, that was borrowed (actually rented, Harry had conjured enough cash to pay off the farmer's loans on this machine. So it was loaned to them quite gladly) from a local muggle farmer.

The anti-muggle wards around farm properties under Dumbledore's control kept any of his muggle farming neighbors from even noticing the place. But if a witch or wizard wanted to drive in muggle equipment... well, there wasn't anything stopping them. The pretty blonde witch looked up to see the many such devices they had driven in and were now busy collecting Dumbledore's crops. Yes, this was trespassing, but the aurors were awfully busy today with more important things.

"You were right, Harry. Farms are too big to easily defend. The wards on this property were extremely light, and whatever alarms they are giving the ones who ought to be responding to them are too busy elsewhere."

Harry shrugged. "It's just an example of the same principle Voldemort used against my grandparents. Farms are big open spaces, and big open spaces are costly to defend adequately, so few people bother. Also, crops can be destroyed in a raid that lasts mere minutes, or stolen like this in a couple of hours, and it takes all year to grow them. So farms are easy targets."

Hermione had been looking out across the field to the adjoining orchards, where scores of House Elves Harry had hired away from

Hogwarts were hard at work. "They seem to know their jobs quite well," the girl observed.

Harry felt mirth as he informed her, "That's because they do this every year. Part of Dumbledore's efforts to increase profits on all of the farms he's stolen were to fire all the human workers and use the elves of Hogwarts instead. It takes them a few minutes to move all of the students' luggage in or out of the castle, and that's one of the biggest tasks they have all year. So it is easy for him to get them to spare the time for harvest or planting."

"You said our world depends on him for food?" Hermione ventured, feeling uneasy about that.

"And that's the real beauty of it," Harry confirmed. "What the government gives, government can take away. Right now Dumbledore holds a complete monopoly on food production for the wizarding world. That's a stranglehold market. Everybody needs it every day. NONE of the stranglehold markets were intended to have been invested in a single family. Even wizards are able to notice what a bad idea THAT would be! So, by design, all of the stranglehold monopolies are split up among many families to prevent exactly the sort of manipulation and power mongering that Dumbledore is getting away with. By holding all the scattered parts of that vital monopoly himself, he is actually breaking the law. But he's Dumbledore, so no one cares. And even if they did he's disguised his control by holding them all through proxies."

Luna had begun nodding. "Only when he fails to deliver, they will suddenly care very much. So they will seek for who is responsible."

"And find Dumbledore," Harry concluded. "Those proxies he wields are pretty obvious to anyone who goes looking. He's the one who wields all the power, and he's the one collecting all the money. Even the most incompetent beings in the world, by which I mean to include Minister Fudge and most of those who work for him, are able to tell that on even the most cursory inspection. And though the Ministry may be a startling collection of incompetent morons, even morons care about what they're going to eat. And There Is No Food! Not even the Minister is blind enough to think starving voters are going to

reelect him, or that they can be distracted from their gnawing bellies by good press or an article here or there. Something is going to have to be done!"

Hermione looked back toward the great bin on a trailer towed behind them where grain was collecting, suddenly having an epiphany. "And if one of those people Dumbledore has stolen the rights to their own monopoly from have a reasonable quantity of food available for sale..."

"That we'd been intending to sell on muggle markets, since we'd been blocked from all magical ones," Harry intruded for her.

Her grin threatened to split her face wide. "Then it would be simple for the Ministry of Magic to conclude the best fix for this problem would merely be to restore control of those stolen monopolies to their original owners!"

"And Dumbledore gets a great big swift kick in the pants." Harry nodded. "It is assumed that some amount of arm twisting and backroom politics are going to result out of any monopoly; people raising prices for their enemies or reducing supply to others if they're not appeased by return favors. That's standard wizarding politics, and a big part of why no stranglehold market is allowed to be an exclusive one. There's just too much power to abuse there. But even so, politicking like that has limits, and the standard punishment for getting out of line is removal of the monopolies you've been abusing. So the inertia of the magical world's traditional response is even in our favor here."

Luna was now peering closely at the dashboard of the harvester. "And that hurts him dearly, because all monopolies are granted with a certain amount of trust inherent in the one receiving them. Having one monopoly stripped away means that trust was damaged severely, and calls all other monopolies into question."

Harry smiled his agreement. "All monopolies are provisional on certain key factors. Quality must be upheld, or those who use your product will petition the government to move that monopoly over to someone who'd do a better job with it. Normally, unless you are doing

a REALLY bad job, a few complaints of that nature can be ignored. All the Old Families are holders of monopolies, and they don't want them to be too easy to take away. So keeping one is a thousand times easier than getting one in the first place."

"But failure to deliver on set minimums of quality or quantity calls a monopoly into question." Luna smoothly purred. "Standards are set when a monopoly is granted, and failure to meet those can result in its removal."

"What we are getting to," Harry added. "Is that once there is no food Albus will lose his farming interests. Those will revert to their original holders, and both Potters, Longbottoms and Weasleys are on that list. Molly has always been eager for her children to get jobs at the Ministry because they'd lost all their own businesses - to learn that Albus had been holding control of one of them from her is going to call that family's loyalty to him into question." He grinned. "Not a major blow, but another small issue for him to deal with."

"But once Albus ALSO fails to deliver on his next ink shipments," Luna stood up with a 'cat caught the canary' look. "The 'pump will already have been primed' so to speak, to take that monopoly away also. And if he then fails to deliver on that magical newspaper only he is allowed to print..."

"His economic empire could crumble to ruins around him," Harry concluded.

"That could distract him," Hermione agreed, impressed. "If you take out some of his support base, he gets weaker. If Hitler couldn't produce tanks, he'd have been weaker. He wouldn't have lost everything. But he's weaker. And that weakness could later contribute to a full demise."

"It will take an enormous amount of work to stop that destruction from happening," Luna agreed firmly. "And the man is already quite busy."

Harry was nodding gleefully, rubbing his hands together. "Oh! This goes so much farther beyond that, though! Did you know that Dumbledore holds the contracts for food delivery to the Royal Family

and British Government? The quality of vine ripened food, stabilized by magic so it ships well, is able to trounce all competition. It's also fully organic, by muggle standards. So he had the best product, and with a few spells to ease over any complications and cause any awkward questions not to be asked, or the people asking them to believe they got the answers they wanted, he sewed that up. But as the supplier of food to the Queen and muggle government, Albus was able to lace those with potions that don't show up on muggle tests, or spells as he chose, and gradually turn the muggle government into his puppet show. Mostly he ignores them. To him, they're just another resource to hold secret in case of an emergency. But the moment they're not eating food whose ingredients were all supplied by him, that control begins to wane."

"Making this not a small fire," Luna smiled triumphantly. "But a major one."

"And the more the Headmaster is running around dealing with emergencies and not able to think, the less effort he is able to put toward investigating us, and the more secure we are." Hermione grinned in triumph also.

"The man is a master of subtlety. We've probably already left him enough clues to identify us." Harry agreed. "Or at least start an investigation that would eventually reveal us. But until he gets time to sit down and put those clues together and think things through so he knows where to start that investigation, we're as safe as we're going to get."

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Author's Notes:

So, yes, Harry now has everything he needs for a magical village save for people and buildings. And he's about to be getting his farms back.

Isn't that nice?

Chapter Thirty-Seven

by Lionheart

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It was a day of chaos, and more chaos had been caused deliberately as the kids thought up every angle they could exploit to annoy Dumbledore.

As aurors were leaving the Ministry building to go put down the magical populace, they ran into a quick Confundus ward Harry had put up over the various exits, and each auror grabbed stacks of posters on their way out.

Posters rather quickly produced at muggle copy shops that read (over a smiling Dumbledore face), "Trust the Headmaster! The Headmaster is your friend. Failure to trust the Headmaster is treason. Treason is punishable by death!"

The auror squads would be pasting those up wherever they went. The Fey Trio didn't WANT to use their newly acquired magical press on this one. They didn't want people to BELIEVE those posters. They put them up to disturb people and get them thinking. They wanted it to look like a manipulation attempt gone too far, something that would wake some of the sheep up.

And, since the aurors would be pasting those up over every tree, rock and animal they came across in their duties, everybody ought to run across at least one of them. They were hung in both Hogwarts and the Ministry, all the places the aurors went (which did not include those places Dumbledore was going to frequent that day, like his office or the Wizengamot chambers).

Smiling nastily, the trio also went to the chocolate frog factory and altered the cards, changing Dumbledore's tile to read 'Dark Lord Dumbledore', and one notable difference over the original was instead of saying he enjoyed chamber music and tenpin bowling, that instead he enjoyed abusing children and anal sex with his good friend, the Death Eater Severus Snape.

The factory had charms in place so they could correct cards already issued, in case of typos or updated information, so they were able to make it so ALL the Dumbledore cards, even the ones already issued, read that way.

Then they snuck in his office through that open window in his tower he'd not yet fixed and stole more artifacts, including the automatically updating attendance roster and the Hogwarts Magic Quill - the one writing down the names of each new magical birth in Britain. They also made off with a second magic quill that addressed all of the envelopes.

They then filed an anonymous report with the Ministry concerning the theft, asking them to look into it, and incidentally also exposing the fact that the Sorting Hat had gone missing.

"Why are we doing this again?" Hermione asked as they all crept out, their magical bags crammed full of books and other loot from the Headmaster's office. "I mean, wasn't it enough to burn the place down the first time?"

Luna smiled. "Because, Hermione, we missed things; and there are precious artifacts that Dumbledore cannot afford to do without - so we had to steal them, because without muggleborn tuition, Hogwarts will fall. There just aren't enough purebloods to sustain it, and the environment is bad enough the halfbloods that make up most of the magical population would go elsewhere if they had to face the sea of pureblood prejudice without any muggleborns there to take the brunt of it."

"And before you ask, we can get this information to another school so that they can recruit them. The muggleborns will still get an education," Harry reassured her. "But don't forget: We are at war."

"Not with the whole world," she huffed.

Luna quickly corrected her. "Hermione, even with perfect grades, all the OWLS and NEWTS you can score, along with both Prefect and Head Girl roles filled perfectly, the best you could hope for in our world is a mid level job at the Ministry working under someone with

half your power and a quarter your brains. Without the Head Girl slot the best position you could have would not even be as good as the lowest, entry level position a pureblood would get. Our world is THAT bigoted! And frankly, you'd have to spread your legs regularly to ugly, talentless, inbred people you despise to get even that much. It's just not worth it. Muggleborns and halfbloods emigrate out of Europe in DROVES!! And they take all our best brains and talent with them. Here, Ron could make Minister of Magic someday. He's stupid, but pureblooded, ambitious, and can easily be controlled - everything they look for in candidates for that position. But you couldn't even be his secretary. You don't have the right parents."

"Dumbledore and Voldemort are symptoms, not the real problems," Harry informed her. "The real problem is the deep bigotry that exists in our world. So long as everything goes on as normal, they can afford to ignore it. But if a major institution like Hogwarts begins to fall, they'll take notice and begin asking questions, like: why can't we get any muggleborns to attend?"

"And, of course, Dumbledore will expend enormous effort to keep that from happening. My! He is going to be busy, isn't he?" Luna giggled.

"One more fire to put out," Hermione agreed, finding a grin.

"Oh, by the way," Luna pretended a dreamy otherworldliness. "You know that microphone we put on Dumbledore? The one that allowed us to overhear his giving Snape a summary of the whole day, the one where he admits to having flaunted international law over a thousand times, and when he instructs him to bring back Voldemort as a useful distraction? I'm thinking we can tie that microphone in to the Wizarding Wireless network to override the previous programming so it broadcasts across all of Britain. There are even stations overseas that can pick it up."

Harry smirked. "Tell me how."

Hermione blinked wildly. "Didn't he use an Unforgivable on Snape during that conversation? Oh, yes! Please! Broadcast that."

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Having caused enough mischief to keep the Headmaster busy for the next lifetime or two, the trio settled down to begin an examination of their loot.

One of the things they'd discovered in that office was that Dumbledore had a stud book, a registry of magical lines out of which he intended to breed the wizarding public like cattle, restoring as many of the old pureblood lines as possible from the damages of inbreeding. This was to have been his new special project, only now he had no time for it.

Hermione was utterly disgusted to learn that she'd been planned for Ronald Weasley. Luna was even less enthused over being passed over entirely as 'unsuitable for breeding', but both of them were shocked at how Harry had been passed off as 'Property of Ginny Weasley'.

All of them were upset by it. The amusing thing was each saved their most powerful reactions for getting upset on behalf of the others.

"Honestly!" Harry grumbled quite angrily. "How in the name of all that's holy could Hermione, the smartest witch of her generation, end up with Ron, a good for nothing layabout with the emotional range of a teaspoon? That prick has less intelligence than those slugs he was barfing up last year! Hermione's not that stupid!"

Hermione herself was ranting in a quiet yet heated voice. "Ginny? The entire basis of that 'relationship' is farcical and horribly shallow! It's no different than young ladies who marry rich, old famous men. They only want the wealth and prestige of being attached to that fame and could care less about love. After being denied love all of his life because of Dumbledore's machinations and manipulations, Harry deserves FAR better than someone who has only lusted after him for his fame!"

"He/she is totally unsuited to you!" Harry and Hermione turned to shout to each other in unison.

That broke the moment and they laughed. Then both broke up and engulfed Luna in a double hug. "And how anyone could think you're unmarriageable is a mystery to me." Hermione reassured.

"Yeah," Harry chuckled, still holding the hug. "Personally I can't wait to prove that I DO think you are 'suitable for breeding'."

Hermione blushed and Luna laughed, the tension gone.

"That will have to wait a few years," Luna said delicately. "But I must agree with both of you that the matches planned for you by Dumbles are singularly awful. Ron is rather... unmotivated." Harry rolled his eyes and mouthed 'lazy', but Luna pretended not to notice. "Hermione is a driven girl. She's intelligent, and has a wide range of interests. She excels in high-pressure situations which require careful thought.

"Ron... well," she sighed, "he's only really interested in food, Quidditch and chess - in short, in his own pursuit of pleasure. He hates school and learning in general. Those two would never survive as a couple."

Now Luna giggled. "And now I have a dirty secret to tell, but Ginny has been playing 'Marry Harry Potter' since she was old enough to walk and listen to bedtime stories. I know. I was there. She'd decided you were the perfect husband before she knew anything about you."

"And at school she's avoided me," Harry continued. "So she knows nothing of the real me. Heck, my own personal stalker, Colin Creevey, knows me better than she does. He's actually talked to me at school. She never does."

"So we're all agreed the Headmaster's ideas for matchmaking are unsuitable," Hermione stated decisively, then smiled. "Well, that's a relief!"

Now Harry got playful, grabbing them both in renewed hugs. "Although now I'm waiting for the rumormill to get started on the fact that both of you are my fiancees. That should make for some interesting talks."

Luna shrugged.

Hermione was openly smug. "Frankly, I'm hoping it will get started soon, as well. I have a few things to say to this culture they aren't going to want to hear. Still, it explains so much that Dumbledore is devoted to the principle that government by the purebloods and for the purebloods should not perish from this earth."

Luna nodded. "He wields too much power for this atmosphere of bigotry to have achieved so much influence, unless he was in favor of it."

The trio turned back to the crates and bags full of things they'd grabbed. They had a whole afternoon to spend going through the treasure trove of loot they'd taken in this and other raids. But this was barely enough time for a brief overview of the previously unexamined stack, and sadly very little of it was labeled.

With smiles, they started in.

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Out of the vaults of Hogwarts they'd gotten an ancient version of those devices to move landed property. The device was a staff with a crystal globe socketed in one end of it. The difference being that the new ones filled up and that was it, whereas this ancient one could fill up a crystal ball, then switch out a full ball for a fresh one. There even came a case of landed properties in snow-globe form, in stasis, with it.

Harry was able to recognize it only because he'd been shopping for something similar. But it was the case of snow-globe properties that tipped them off this one was different.

Harry whistled, holding up the staff. "Do you know these things go for a cool fifty million? That's why wizarding properties aren't more migratory. They can actually pick up a house, orchard, farm, lake or what have you to move the whole thing elsewhere. But no one can afford one. It's cheaper to sell your house and buy a bigger one where you want to be."

"Couldn't someone buy one, then rent out their services using it for much less?" Hermione inquired.

"You're thinking like a muggle - practical. See it from their point of view for a moment - that of status obsessed glory seekers." Harry smirked, then went on instructing. "Sure, they could do that, but the only families rich enough to buy one are too proud of their breeding to stoop to creating businesses, much less perform any labor. And most of the downtrodden masses who are spineless enough suck-ups to be close enough to those families to be chosen as servants are so dishonest you put something this valuable in their hands and they'll run off with it. So the only reason to buy one of these is bragging rights, 'Aha! Look what I can do that you can't!' and all that. But, like all fads, the passion fades and they toss this stick up in an attic somewhere and forget about it. After all, you don't have a legitimate reason to move property all that often. Easier by far just to buy houses at both locations."

"Harry, I think you ought to see this." Luna, who'd been looking through the snow-globes pointed him to a shoebox full, the only ones in this collection to be labeled, and by the lack of dust, more recent than the others.

The boy went over to inspect her find and paled momentarily after looking in on them. Lifting one up to examine in the light, he scowled angrily.

"What is it?" Hermione asked innocently, concerned over what got him so upset.

"The personal possessions of the Potters, as well as countless other families either orphaned or destroyed by recent battles." Luna answered.

"We'd thought these had been destroyed along with my grandparents," Harry retained his scowl, gently placing down one globe to pick up another. Then his expression softened. "Apparently Dumbledore's habit of being first on the scene after a murder did not start with Hagrid picking me out of the ruins of my family's cottage."

He must have been showing up with this staff to collect valuable properties for years."

Now wondering over what had caused his anger to abate, Hermione stepped closer to get a look at the globe he was holding that had caused his face to soften. "What is it?"

Harry glanced over to her, then smiled, handing her the globe so she could see. "Only the original Crystal Palace, built for the Great Exhibition at Hyde Park in 1851, bought by one of the previous Lord Potters when the muggles thought it was being moved to Sydenham Hill. They got a replacement while we got the original, which the Lord Potter of the time had greatly expanded for use as a greenhouse, increasing its original 990,000 square feet to over four square miles and incorporating two other of the designer's creations in its new design - including the previous Great Conservatory, which was the largest glass building in the world of its time and was heated by eight boilers using seven miles of iron pipe, and was lit at one time by twelve thousand lamps. For the muggles it was too expensive to maintain, but their attempts to demolish it with explosives concealed our acquisition of it quite nicely."

Hermione's eyes bugged out as she stared at the elaborate glass structure depicted in the round crystal in her hands.

Luna chuckled. "For a family whose fortune was based on farming, having a greenhouse of that size was a prize beyond measure. Even if they could not legally market potion ingredients, the possibilities for exotic foods and other rare delicacies would have been a very powerful advantage."

Hermione looked over to Harry again, only to see the boy shrug casually. "Yes it was. We put unbreakable charms on all the glass, and used other magical methods of reducing operating costs, then got moving on to business. That was the time the fortunes of my family really started to change, when we started to truly get ahead and come out of obscurity into greatness."

Harry realized he was quoting books he'd read about his family over the summer, and that caused him to huff slightly in amusement, but

he went on anyway sharing these details with his friends and hopefully future wives.

"Sir Joseph Paxton, the original designer of the Crystal Palace, was actually retained by my family for the project. He did good work for us, so we had him construct a large Neo-Renaissance English country house as our new family seat, one of the greatest built during the Victorian Era." He lifted a new globe out of the box, and both girls were startled to recognize a manor house detailed there in the style he'd been talking about.

Now it began to make sense, what he'd said about 'We'd thought these had been destroyed along with my grandparents.'

Harry was still talking, relaying information he'd learned himself just that summer. "Those were prosperous times for us, as the Crystal Palace cum greenhouse was raking in all sorts of profits from exotic fruits grown locally that none of our competitors could match.

"The showpiece central hall of our manor was 120 feet long and 60 feet high, its roof a full glass skylight. The massive library held more than 8,000 tomes. Because lavish entertaining was important back then, in addition to the private family apartments the place was built with eighty guest suites. The architect was first and foremost a gardener, and his layout of gardens, fountains, terraces and cascades left no doubt as to his ability. Such was his enthusiasm that thousands of gallons of water were needed in order to feed the myriad fountains and cascades which abounded in the Crystal Palace park. The two main jets were 250 feet high."

Harry sighed, turning away from the globe both girls were examining, where all of the details he'd been discussing were contained in miniature. "But it, and the Potter family country house was evidently stolen by Dumbledore on my grandparent's death and brought here. I'd assume he wanted to wait until enough other people had forgotten about them to bring them out as his own properties, excusing their appearance on some pretext or other."

"Here is Weasley Hall, too!" Luna cried out excitedly, pulling out another globe from the box, rather purposefully and successfully

distracting Harry from his thoughts, wondering just how long Dumbledore had been an enemy to his family and reminding him there had been other victims as well.

Successfully distracted, Harry turned to look at the ball, containing a well built manor composed mostly of wood, as suited shipbuilders, and with some amount of shock he exclaimed, "Why is it ORANGE?!?"

"Oh?" Luna lofted an eyebrow playfully. "You mean you don't know?" Seeing him shake his head 'no' she continued, "the Weasley family once owned the Chudley Cannons, didn't you know that? Actually, it's odd, but they were primarily shipbuilders for the longest time. But the market for magical sailing vessels has gone down and down until they are as you see them now. I believe they even had to sell their monopoly to get by."

Hermione turned to look at Harry. "I thought you said the Weasleys were on that list of families who had farming interests stolen by Dumbledore?"

Luna chuckled brightly, answering for him. "Farming was a sideline interest for them. Only the weakest families specialize in a single area, since markets change and new laws get applied that can crush any single interest. But the general weakening of our economy caused by Dumbledore grabbing all wealth producing interests for himself has hurt any number of families."

Also seeing the value in distracting Harry from thoughts of wondering how long Dumbledore had been an enemy, Hermione grabbed something from the nearest box. Fortunately this item was labeled.

"A Pot of Plant Protection?" She blinked several times at the flower pot in her hands before reading the tag for further instructions. "It says any insect entering the pot, or alighting on a plant within it, dies if it is of a species harmful to the plant." Genuinely distracted herself now, she began reading more. "It also has instructions for how to make more of these."

Luna peered over her shoulder. "Hmm. A magical patent application includes one sample of the item, a summary of what it does, and instructions for the process by which they are made. This looks like one, although since I've never heard of this before, I'd say whoever prepared it died before they got it to the Ministry for registration. Who is it signed?"

"Edgar Bones," Hermione read. "Do you think he could be a relation to Susan?"

"Her uncle, died along with his wife and children during the last war. Many felt them to be among the greatest witches and wizards of the age," Luna replied.

"That would explain them coming up with new inventions." Hermione looked at the pot more closely.

Neither mentioned that this pot had probably been looted from the ruins after the family's murder. And for it to have been stored here, in the school, said that looter had probably been Dumbledore. But the idea went through everyone's minds.

"We should give this to Susan," Hermione proclaimed.

"It would be worth a fortune to her family," Luna agreed softly. "Nearly every witch or wizard growing rare or valuable plants would want them, and it would make some species that are delectable to insect pests much easier to grow."

"Hold on a minute," Harry stopped them from taking the pot away to go carry out those plans immediately. He was taking notes off the label.

"Harry," Hermione scolded. "We can't hurt her by making our own. That would be wrong!"

"Susan Bones is not my enemy, nor is her Aunt Amelia," Harry answered. "I would not hurt either of them. But I think I can convert this charm formula into a potion recipe."

"That's the same thing!" she insisted.

Harry stopped what he was doing to look up at her. "Oh, really? Look, if this does yield the recipe for a Potion of Plant Protection I'm not going to release that to the general public, just use it for our own interests. And before you get your panties in a twist, think a moment. Because I don't think they'll be making pots big enough to plant a dryad's tree in - and it'd make it bloody obvious what tree it was if they did."

Hermione's eyes went wide and her mouth formed a silent 'Oh'.

Even from the short amount of association they'd had with her so far, they'd learned through Trelawney that dryads regarded dangers to their trees as seriously as ordinary women viewed harm to their complexions, and insect attacks were seen much the same as ordinary women did, "Ew! BUG! Get it away from me!" In short, their trees were invariably well cared for, and treatments to keep them safe were as assiduously sought after as normal women sought beauty care.

Harry tapped his notes and rolled up the parchment. "Okay, that'll do it. I'm pretty sure this can convert over to a potion. And if it does, maybe I can experiment to make an everlasting version to be drunk by our favorite dryad, maybe even something ordinary seeds can be soaked in so theirs aren't the only trees in the forest untouched by harmful bugs."

Luna smiled sweetly. "Harry darling? If you do that, can you also ensure that the protection extends to wood furniture made by the dryad? I'd like to be protected from people spraying attraction serums to get bugs to migrate into my panty drawer, and moths into my clothes closet."

Hermione's eyes had gone wide as she thought over the possibilities herself. "And bookcases! Countless books get destroyed by bookworms, beetles and wasps carving up the paper to use as food or nesting material!"

"And beds," Harry agreed. "Personally, I could go the rest of my life quite happily without ever having another spider scamper over my face as I sleep."

Both the girls shuddered.

Heartened by this discovery, and what it could mean for their lives, they went on cataloging what they could, until midway through the process Harry leaned back to stretch and declared, "Well, out of the loot we stole from Hogwarts during our little escape attempt, we have everything we need for our little ritual to finally free Fawkes. Everything, save for one, that is. And that last one... I don't know how we're going to do for it."

"What is it we need, Harry?"

"A live Ashwinder," he answered, shaking his head. "But they live for only a few minutes and spawn randomly out of magical fires. They are a hazard, not a pet. There are spells that can be used to keep them alive, but trade in the snakes is considered illegal, and the uses that fire serpents were once put to forgotten, so nobody bothers anymore. Getting one now... Well, I could either plant myself in a chair by a magical fire for the next couple of years and wait for one to spawn, or I could send out an offer to buy one so someone else can do the watching and waiting. But there are so few uses those beasts could be put to that it would probably tip Dumbledore off as to what we are attempting."

Fawkes the phoenix then flashed in, holding a living ashwinder in his talons that he dropped right on top of them. Harry stunned the fire serpent as part of an instantaneous reaction, then cast the spells to keep it alive as his brain rebooted soon after.

Fawkes then flashed away again, leaving the ashwinder behind.

"Call the dryads, we've got a ritual to start," Hermione quipped with a smile.

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Author's Notes:

Ah, that chapter was a long time in coming, and I'm glad it's finally over and done with. The stuff they've been collecting for some time has finally started to make an appearance, and with it they can change some parts of their lives.

More will be done on this later. But for now, there are other neglected aspects that I intend to be getting back to.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

by Lionheart

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Out of all of the reactions Dumbledore was known for, screaming frustration was not usually among them. But he did so as he paced around his office that evening as he contemplated the growing tide of events.

The struggle between him and Voldemort, while on its surface a bitter one, had down beneath some of the markings of a gentleman's duel or a stately game of chess. Each side considered and contemplated their actions, then made a move. The other then waited, considered that move and thought about it a while before making a countermove.

All very sober, relaxed and gentlemanly, each one granting the other plenty of time and chances to make their next planned attempt to gradually outwit the other, using the rest of the world as their pawns.

It was a game at which he'd excelled.

This Dark Muggle, on the other hand, fought like a dirty old ruffian. Albus had never seen anything like it in magical culture. This Colonel struck, and struck, and kept on striking without any pause or respite.

It was maddening. Albus hadn't even properly formed a response to his first attack yet!

It took time for information to filter back from his contacts. It required time for careful thought to consider the opponent's move and plan how best to counter that. And, of course, the more there was to consider the longer it required to think things through properly.

Dumbledore was shocked by the sheer volume of information pouring back to him about this Colonel. He was used to asking his contacts and subordinates for "anything you might know" about someone or something. Most of the people knew little enough that it was the work of but a moment to put it all together and assemble a coherent whole.

But information hadn't stopped pouring back yet!

It was more than a little humbling to the old man to find out how widespread Colonel Sander's influence was, and that made him really worry. So far he had found businesses openly proclaiming allegiance to him in almost every nation, and the image of Colonel Sanders was iconic in several of those. He made no attempt to hide who he was or that he was present and active.

The implications of that frankly scared the old Headmaster!

Virtually all Dark Lords found secrecy to be their greatest ally. Dumbledore himself had achieved much that he credited to having kept his secrets better than the rival Dark Lords he opposed.

But then... it struck him. Their patterns were the SAME!! Both he himself and this Dark Colonel had deceived the public, holding forth a front of a kindly old man for their own dark natures to hide behind!

The thought was chilling.

This Sanders had seen through one of his greatest advantages, or done the same by himself. Albus had believed himself to be the only one clever enough to have pulled off such an immaculate deception. But here it was, he had a rival, no, an ENEMY who had flawlessly achieved the same general image!

What was worse, this Dark Colonel had information sources that Dumbledore knew nothing about, and had been using them to terrifying effect in all of his strikes. Dumbledore was an old hand at secret wars. He knew the kind of data you needed on your foes before you could safely initiate attacks on them. Worse, the informational requirements grew more and larger to pull off the kind of success rate this Colonel's minions had achieved, and worse still, they grew larger yet again to accomplish anything like his stealth.

Those kind of strikes required a detailed knowledge of your enemy, his tactics and defenses, and precisely how to bypass them. One of the perfect examples of this was how they'd taken Trelawney: in and

out without fuss or bother, even managing to strike his own office in the meantime!

The most dismaying thing to the Headmaster was how they had achieved all of this without setting off any abnormal alarms.

Dumbledore was now unsure whether his pocket oracle was alive or dead, if the chicken left in his burned out office was a warning, or the body of his seer. But he had reviewed what he knew of the occasion and tracked his being dosed with malaclaw venom to that point, when he'd last spoken to his oracle in his office.

That raised several uncomfortable questions.

For one, he had to consider Trelawney having been turned by the Dark Colonel - but discarded that at once. He knew her mind too well, had implanted too many suggestions and subconscious orders, and had seen her too recently for her to have been subverted away from him that easily. But then he had to ask if that person in his office had been an impostor, and could not see how that could be. She had given a true prophecy, one he had personally seen the accuracy of too many times for it to have been faked, and more than that the wards had detected her as having Trelawney's magical core!

Of course, those two intruders who'd been through Snape's potion stores had managed to flawlessly duplicate the magic cores of two of his students. But that brought him back to the prophecy.

Unless, the Colonel had sent a seer to impersonate a seer?

A second chill went through Dumbledore's old bones at the thought of his enemy having such a resource, and MORE! A seer he was willing to RISK on such an endeavor!! That implied he might have more than one, enough not to miss one terribly much if she got lost out on assignment.

A very small thought way at the back of Dumbledore's head began to wonder if this Colonel Sanders had indeed surpassed him in so many ways, if the Dark Colonel might not just surpass him in everything?

Already he had reason to believe what he'd thought was his own trademark victory as a Dark Lord, being taken as the Leader of the Light, was not done first and better by this Dark Muggle. Surely he'd surpassed him by defeating him and taken mastery of the Elder Wand, even if Dumbledore himself retained actual physical possession of the device. But then to also have a pet seer, or more than one if he went on risking one like that...

The Headmaster felt genuinely scared for the first time since he was a small boy as he sat gingerly down in his seat, lowering himself slowly and wondering if the legs on this one would fall out from under him also.

Still, it did no good to dwell on fears, and the Dark Ravenclaw firmly dragged his mind back from speculation to what he did know.

His guest, whether Trelawney or not, had dosed him with malaclaw venom by dipping a corner of her hankie in his tea; an ingenious approach that put him on edge with how adroitly she, whoever she was, had slipped by his defenses.

If his guest had uncorked a potion and poured that into his tea, the paintings then hanging around his office would've told him. But women especially are dipping napkins or handkerchiefs to wipe something more or less all of the time! If his wards went down to that level of detail nothing he could've done to himself could've handled it. Tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of warnings per real problem was just too much!

People did certain things as normal parts of their routines. Even he could not record every sip, sigh, or snigger to occur in Hogwarts! Every time a button was buttoned, or page read, was something that might've been done against him by a foe on this level.

Dumbledore himself was known for how elegant were his schemes, but even he would've hesitated to venture a plot as carefully crafted and risky as this! The Colonel was truly a terrifying foe to have accomplished it. And that was only the beginnings of what he'd uncovered about these plots and schemes!

With a tired sigh, Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, only to have the seat collapse, dumping him onto the floor just as a tripwire set for just such an occasion released a heavy rock from his office ceiling, crushing the old man beneath its tremendous weight and leaking a puddle of blood out over the office floor.

Before he died, Dumbledore had an instant to wonder at the ease and utter contempt with which this Dark Muggle kept killing him. Then the boulder had crushed down upon him.

After Severus brought him back again he had to pause to consider the artistry this Colonel Sanders displayed, as having fallen backwards in his own chair Albus got to watch the boulder accelerate in the microsecond before his life got extinguished by the weight.

Truly, he had so far been mere food for 'the Chicken'.

That would have to change. That MUST change. But how?!?

|||

Bellatrix stepped into the quaint little muggle house and smirked as she beheld the occupants.

Prime fodder.

Vernon had just looked up and was about to use the word 'freak' when his chin disappeared, along with the rest of his jawbone, as the operative part of his scowl disintegrated into a shower of blood, bone and tooth fragments.

As Petunia's shrieks, that would've lit up the neighborhood, were met and canceled out by the silencing wards placed around the house, Bellatrix smiled at her prey.

In an innocent sounding sing-song the Death Eater declared. "Ooooh, is the widdle bully scawed?"

Casual flicks of her wand transfigured the fireplace into a giant hand holding Petunia, and stretching her abnormally long neck out just a

touch more, while another sent Dudley careening over the counter into the kitchen and crashing into the cabinets there, where the cutlery drawer sprang open and dozens of knives leapt out to impale him dozens of times through soft tissue, nailing him to the broken cabinetry without killing or even seriously injuring the boy.

Bellatrix had learned how to take her time with these things.

Vernon had rolled backwards off his chair. One hand was investigating the bloody ruin that was his face, and from the shocked look in his eyes Bella deduced he was not quite able to bring himself to believe that part of him was no longer there.

Pity. He'd be so much more fun to play with if he could grow a pair.

Bellatrix adopted a playful air, doing a fair McGonagall impersonation as she instructed, "Now, so you know, you aren't the only ones who have tortured the helpless. Union rules required that I come explain a few things to you so you scabs can be appraised of the regulations on this sort of thing. First."

She disintegrated the shoe and blew off the toes from Vernon's left foot.

"The strong bully the weak. Second."

The Death Eater looked into his eyes and smiled sweetly before doing exactly the same to his right foot. "Magic users are strong, and muggles are weak. You've been upsetting the Union Board terribly with the way you've mixed THAT one up!"

She laughed. It was a disturbingly innocent sound, proving to her listeners that the woman could not be terribly right in the head.

Vernon had run out of hands for clutching at his missing body parts, and now his eyes had begun to widen with a terrified belief. Petunia, on the other hand, though she clawed at the stone finger around her throat, had not yet been cowed enough to calm her rage at magic using individuals. Part of that had to be that she could not tilt her head down to see what had already been done to her husband, and

she had no personal experience with how dangerous a witch or wizard could be. It had to be that last that convinced her the brief glimpse she'd had of Vernon's disintegrating jaw had to have been something else. She couldn't let herself be convinced his injury was as bad as it was.

Petunia could not take a world where she and Vernon were not in charge.

"You can't be here!" The horse-faced woman insisted in defiance of all logic. "The Headmaster promised us! No magical folk! No repercussions! He even got us out of that freakish court!"

"Yes, but he's not in charge of the Union," Bellatrix declared pleasantly. "So guarantees from him are useless." One more flick of her wand and the electric appliance exploded out of the fireplace, which gouted actual flames. Bellatrix smiled as Petunia screamed, but the flames drew back into the hearth before they'd done much more than consumed most of the muggle woman's clothes and hair, and perhaps singe her a bit.

Petunia was whimpering, yet still as much hopeful as defiant as she declared, "You can't be here! The Head..." she sobbed and closed her eyes as sparks began to fly up threatening her face, "headmaster insisted that no witch or wizard could come here so long as we had the boy."

"The Headmaster is full of promises he can't keep," Bellatrix replied sweetly, before swiping her wand at Vernon and levitating him onto his favorite chair, an overstuffed recliner that she transfigured into a bare steel electric chair surrounded by torture implements.

"But the wards!" Petunia kept insisting weakly in defiance of the reality before her, unable to accept what was happening.

Bellatrix laughed, then raised her eyes toward the stairs and gloated, "Perhaps I should introduce you to the man who got me past those puny wards. The head of the Torture and Violence Union: Lord Voldemort himself."

Petunia's eyes grew wide in horrified shock, stilling her into silence.

Moments later footsteps came down the stairs. Bellatrix bowed as a man hove into view.

It was Harry Potter.

Vernon was too miserable strapped as he was to a hard metal chair dealing with the squirming pain of his bleeding injuries to care. But as Petunia inhaled to shout and make up the difference, Bellatrix hit her with a short Crucio, and the tirade of verbal abuse the horse faced woman had prepared instead turned into throat-tearing screams of unbelievable agony.

Bellatrix held the curse for only a second. It wouldn't do to damage her toys too much this early in play, after all.

Harry seated himself at the dining table, ignoring the evidence of blood and violence around him as if those things were ordinary. As he sat, he spread out the thick sheaf of files he'd been reading.

Files both adult Dursleys recognized as having come from their hidden safe in the master bedroom.

"Oh, don't bother asking how I knew you had these," Harry quipped without looking up at his injured relatives. "I found copies among the Headmaster's own files, and just wanted to check and see if yours matched. A simple unlocking charm handled the lock on the safe. Really, you'd think none of you ever expected me to grow up to be a wizard. But then," the boy looked up, holding a stack of letters written on heavy parchment in one hand. "From the correspondence you shared, I know that you didn't. I read Dumbledore's half, the letters you sent to him, and now I've seen your half, the ones he sent to you, detailing your agreements - including the payout you get on my death, which he's already promised to hush up your part in, and he plans to return me to you yet again so you get another chance to off me."

The boy dropped the heavy stack of letters and stood.

"So let me sum it up," said Harry hotly, "you neglected and abused me, belittled and humiliated me, insulted me, starved me, beat me, vilified me, dehumanized me to everyone, and made me your personal slave; while all the while collecting a small fortune for my upkeep and working a high salary job without responsibilities in a company I own. And all that time you were calling me a 'free-loader', while you were, in fact, living, rent-free I must add, in a house that, it turns up, belongs to me, and plotting to kill me for my money which, as it happens, you are already stealing. Tell me, uncle, did you escape from a Charles Dickens novel? Or do you maybe have an aunt that makes coats out of little puppies or something?" Harry finished, his anger resonating in Vernon Dursley's puke-colored face.

Petunia gasped, and cried, "Oh, Vernon, the freak knows about Cruella! What if the neighbors find out?"

"Oh you have FAR more to worry about than that!" Harry declared, and it was not in a nice way. No, his face was that of a boy who'd been a slave for over ten years coming back to get his revenge.

It was not a pleasant face to look upon.

He grinned in a very nasty way. "No, I am going to show you why Voldemort was one of the most feared wizards ever to grace the British Isles. You see, he did his research, loads of homework before he went active as a dark lord. As a Ministry Unspeakable he had access to literal tons of records most of us never see; most don't even know exist and fewer still care to look at, and he was a brilliant student who studied them well. Can I show you some of the truly ancient dark curses he uncovered?"

Petunia furiously shook her head in the stony grasp, but Harry ignored her. "Did you know that most pagan traditions were just muggles worshiping wizards? That's part of why the Hindus have millions of gods and goddesses. But I digress. Over here in the West was a bunch of Greek wizards who lived on Mt. Olympus, and they still have a very nice city there, by the way, hidden from muggles of course. But before they came to power the Olympians had to overthrow another group of wizards who'd previously controlled that area and called themselves the Titans. One of the things Zeus did to

cement his leadership over the Olympian wizards was to punish one of those defeated Titans with a horrible curse demonstrating why no one should dare mess with him. I'm sure you've heard the story passed down by muggles of Prometheus chained to a rock and having his liver eaten out every day by a giant eagle? This curse is the source of that legend and Voldemort uncovered it. You see, what it does is constrain one creature so that no food will ever nourish it - except the flesh of another creature named at the time the spell is cast. So you really could bind an eagle to eat someone's liver for the rest of eternity, provided that someone could live through it, of course."

"That is the real problem, of course," Bellatrix giggled, and Harry reached over and tickled her under her chin. The woman purred, literally purred, as she leaned into his hand.

The sight was more than slightly disturbing.

For Bellatrix' part, she had enough flaws and quirks of her own that she didn't care if her Lord chose to speak of himself in the third person. In fact, if he did it much more she might take it up herself, emulating her beloved master by speaking about herself that way, too.

In fact, she gave it a test. "Mmm, My Lord makes Bellatrix happy."

Harry grinned in reply. "Bellatrix, my most faithful servant. Vernon here has plans to murder me. He was the cause of most of the physical mistreatment of my host body here. He is the muscle behind their violence, and the true enforcer of their hate. See to it that he won't strike me again, won't you?"

Alight with an unholy glee, the beautiful yet insane woman turned and quite calmly cast four Reducto spells, the first one taking off Vernon's right arm at the shoulder, then his left leg at the knee, and finally his remaining arm and leg in the same manner. Then she applied minor fiery hexes to the stumps to cauterize the bleeding.

Vernon's wordless howls of pain, for his tongue had already been blasted off along with his jaw, filled the house until he collapsed into weak burbles, already spent.

Petunia had grown deathly still on seeing Harry's eyes flash red as he spoke to the cruel woman. His aunt didn't know what this meant, but she knew that whatever it was could not be good for her or her family.

Harry's eyes kept glowing red as he spoke to her. It was a minor trick, but a useful one, and it was very intimidating imitating Voldemort like this. Besides, it made Bellatrix happy. "Aunt Petunia, you and yours did all the harm you could to me, and you started before I was even out of diapers, LONG before I could've done anything to deserve your hatred. Dumbledore put me here, he says, because of the power of my mother's sacrifice protecting me, and the horrible thing is he is partly right. The energy of that love kept you from killing me, no matter how hard you tried. Don't think I've forgotten those times Uncle Vernon ran me over with his car, or the time you put me in my cupboard for four months at a stretch without food or water, or any of those lesser beatings, or the times you got creative trying to kill me."

Harry's gaze was now as hard as the stone hand that held her. "I could see you got a sick sense of satisfaction out of forcing me to do all the work that kept you and yours fed, the house clean, and the garden winning awards, even while you blackened my name to any who would listen. But have you never heard the phrase: what goes around, comes around? Well, today is the day. Let's start with the money, shall we? I know it's impossible to reclaim any significant portion of it out of your accounts. You three have already spent as much of it as possible on yourselves, and took a sick sort of pleasure out of not spending even a single penny on me. You made me eat leftovers and wear rags, even got my glasses out of a charity bin. So the money is not there to be gotten back. That's fine. I know the amounts. So this morning I dropped by an insurance place and cast a few Confundus charms and filed a few papers. Now you, Vernon and Dudley all have high life insurance policies, have had for years as far as anyone knows. I even had some of the largess of your bank accounts transferred to pay for it, and a few spells there and the records all say, and the people believe, that these transfers have been going on for years."

Harry took a specific piece of paper out of the pile. "So, since I couldn't get the money you'd stolen back any other way, your life

insurance gets to pay for it. I'm sure I'll be able to act devastated for a second or two when news of your demise reaches me at school, apparently the victims of some cult. A really sick one, too. There's plenty of blood and body parts around here to be convincing."

An icy calm had descended over the boy as Petunia watched in silence. "But the money is only part of it, and the smallest part of it at that. You hurt me in all the ways you could imagine. I wouldn't even have had these eyes had you not poured bottle after bottle of rubbing alcohol down my throat, hoping I'd die, or at least go blind. But this is hardly the time to go listing all of your crimes against your own flesh and blood. If I did I wouldn't have time to pay you back. So, to cut to the quick, what was it you and your spawn always called me? A freak, wasn't it?"

Three robed figures appeared behind Harry. He stepped aside to introduce them. "Allow me to present to you your fates. Werewolves are real in the magical world. Real, but despised, hated and vilified. Your son gets to be one. Similarly, Vampires exist among us, and are just as contagious. Guess what? Vernon gets to develop a pathological fear of suntanning. And as for you, don't think I've forgotten you holding my face against a hot burner whenever I made trivial mistakes cooking. You, my dear aunt, get to be a hag - an ugly parody of a woman with uncontrollable cravings for human flesh. Not too different from what you already are, actually."

As he named them, each of three robed guests threw back their hoods, revealing Fenrir Greyback, a hag, and a vampire.

Bellatrix waved her wand, summoning Dudley out of the kitchen and binding him to the sofa with thick ropes.

As the trio of magical creatures moved to feed and spread their contagion, Harry kept on speaking. "Oh, and just so you know, this is not a power up. I have no intention of giving you any more power to hurt me, so all of you will be cursed so they may only feed off of each other's flesh."

Petunia was the only one not too wrapped up in her own pain to understand, and her face had become a mass of horror.

Harry smiled. "Don't you see? That's the beauty of it. Due to my mother's protection none of you will ever be able to kill the others. I couldn't kill you. And you couldn't kill me in spite of over a decade of trying. Now I get to lock the three of you in a tiny box somewhere so you can spend the rest of your natural lives torturing each other the way you once tortured me. Meanwhile the muggle police will report you dead, and I'll get some repayment, both in terms of actual damages and in satisfaction, for what you've done to me."

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Harry threw up in the toilet.

Bellatrix and the other Death Eaters he'd summoned had taken the Dursleys away to begin their punishment. Each of his relatives had been outfitted with chain collars inscribed with most of the runes that made up a Dark Mark. He couldn't give them actual Marks without them willingly committing murder to get one. The necromantic energies were required. But he did include the tracking portions of the Mark, along with a few extra surprises - a remote 'die' command being prominent.

There was also a special surprise in that each of the Dursleys had been injected with a potent dose of basilisk venom transfigured by Bellatrix into a chemical the body stored in fat but could never use, so it stayed in tissues forever. Most transfigurations were quite temporary, but the necklace held it in place as one of its secret functions.

So, if the magical necklace were ever removed, they'd die instantly from the basilisk venom suddenly appearing in their systems. They wouldn't even know that was a danger until too late. And if they kept those necklaces on he could kill any one or all of the Dursleys in an instant, at any range.

Harry emptied the last of what was in his stomach. The dry heaves began.

An air freshening charm was cast. Harry was so upset and wracked by the sickness that was a result of his emotions that he didn't care who it was, almost didn't notice. Only when hands began to work his weary shoulders did he crack a bleary eye open to see who it was.

Luna was kneeling on the bathroom floor beside him, her hands massaging his shoulders while her face was a picture of concern.

Harry grinned horribly for her. "I thought I'd wanted revenge," he told her.

She nodded, understanding, and he suddenly recalled she'd been sick the day after killing her uncle. He wondered who'd helped her, or if anyone had.

She gave him a small, sad, but wise smile. "When you want it, you think revenge will feel good. After you have it, you realize just what a burden it is."

"I should kill them right now." Harry nodded. "Put them out of their misery. I... when I got Voldemort's memories and skills, I thought I could be better than he was. Yet here I am doing the same thing."

Luna considered a moment. "Not quite the same," she intoned, still rubbing his shoulders in a way that made some of the hurt go away. "But close. I think the defining difference was that he did this type of thing to people who were total strangers and complete innocents - and whatever else they are, you CAN'T call the Dursleys innocent!"

She gave him a small, encouraging look. "Yes, you were brutal. But you can't say they didn't start it. You were a child, and full of love. You still are eager to love those around you. You'd have cherished them dearly if only they'd been kind to you. Instead, they chose to do everything in their considerable power to ruin, maim and destroy you. And they kept chasing those plans still. You couldn't leave them alone, as they were still being used as willing tools in this war against you. They would've done the same to you had it been within their power. But all the same you shouldn't let them succeed by turning you into something like them."

"No." Harry shook his head with all the energy of determination his emotion wracked body could summon. "I'll never be like them, or Voldemort. Once was enough. Never again."

He gave her a sickly smile. "I've learned not to like the taste of it."

"There you are." Luna smiled at him radiantly. "That's your difference. It was Voldemort's favorite flavor, and the staple diet of the Dursleys. So long as you avoid any more of it, you should do fine."

She began helping him gently to his feet, sparing a few glances to the muggle toilet, wondering how to clean the vomit out of it. Harry answered by showing her how to flush it.

"Who helped you through this?" Harry demanded as she helped him out of the room. Suddenly he had to know.

Luna smiled softly. "Hermione has soft shoulders, a kind heart, and infinite patience for listening. I'd highly recommend her for all your future 'I got my revenge and now wish I hadn't' needs - except you already promised you weren't going to do any more of it."

"She held me all night long," Luna told him soberly. "And I never stopped crying. Not once. All night. I know he was an evil man who hurt countless people. I know he killed my mother and was going to murder me. My head can accept that the world is a better place without him. But a small little girl deep inside my heart keeps insisting, 'But I shouldn't have to hurt him! He's my uncle, he should love me!'"

Harry chuckled humorlessly. "I wonder why we never feel like this after killing Snape, or Dumbledore."

"Hmph!" Luna's nose sought the air and she shifted to mock effrontery. "I can go on quite happily doing that. You should be glad killing them feels nothing like hurting family."

Harry thought about it a second. "You're right. I am." He nodded.

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Author's Notes:

I almost didn't post this, going rounds in my mind over 'the Dursley scene is too harsh. I've got to tone it down. Ok, I can't tone it down, I'll have to cut it. How can I save some important bits?' Until it came to me to write the follow up scene where he is hacking up into the toilet suffering reactions. That seemed to take the curse off it.

Chapter Thirty-Nine
by Lionheart

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Sirius Black was a happy man.

He'd not expected to be. Not long ago it would have been hard for his life to get worse. First Azkaban, then life on the run as a hunted fugitive, eating table scraps and what he could catch as a half-starved, mangy hound...

Then he'd caught a wiff of fried chicken and life had taken a decided turn.

Now he was in France, exonerated and a free citizen. Amelia was right, the French had been only too glad to grant him a trial, if only to tweak the noses of the British, and what a tweak it was! Now half the newspapers in Europe were running the story of him having been framed then locked away by some of the most respected British citizens seeking to hide their own crimes.

This would have been a minor flash in the pan save for the Prophet Disaster following almost immediately on its heels, then the Wireless Expose later in that same day!

Most people in the ICW had not lived through greater shocks. Even those old enough to have lived through the war with Grindelwald had not had so much information about their enemy dumped on them at once.

As a result, the press were having a field day. Storms of controversy had erupted over the whole thing. It was the greatest issue the International Confederation had been called on to deal with since its founding, as over half the members of that body owed their allegiance and positions to Dumbledore.

The sad thing was, so many people had loved the old coot so much, and been so well conditioned by minor blow ups before all blowing over and revealing that he'd been right all along, that the old man's

tremendous political credit might well be enough to carry him through this crisis, influence intact - and the fact that over half the members of the ICW owed their allegiance and positions to Dumbledore had nothing to do with that, of course.

No, something would be done. But it would be some time before they knew if anything real arose from this mess. Sadly, the one speed of government that could be counted on was 'slow', and the only more reliable speed was 'slower'.

There were tempers alight on all sides of this. Some felt the Headmaster was being manipulated or maligned. The French were upset and clamoring for repayment for the insult to their nation, but many other countries loved the old fossil just as much as Britain did.

In any case, they'd be years chewing over this mess. It was not unusual, politicians could be years debating what style of table to sit at. When one side wanted the negotiations stalled, they went nowhere; and Albus still had many friends in high places who did not feel personally threatened by the latest news and revelations.

But then, you could blow both wings off an aircraft and it still took a while to hit the ground. And one thing government could generally be counted on was, granted a clear choice between two options, was somehow to come up with a third that had the disadvantages of both and the advantages of neither.

As bad as those provocations were, they'd be debating this for a while. That was inescapable as it was just the nature of government. And before they ever came to a decision what to do about him, there would be wheat tariffs in unrelated countries, and the maintenances of busses involved in the bill.

At least, in light of the recent Prophet affair, the international community was being wary of stuff mailed out of England, particularly to their decision makers and important persons. So everything out of there was getting triple checked, and Dumbles' Confounding letter had gotten caught, fueling all sorts of suspicions - including the question, "How long has he been doing this?"

Almost overlooked in the rest of this scandal, an article printed in the latest issue of the Quibbler "Practical Defenses Against Mind Readers", pointed out that both Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore were practiced mind readers who routinely scanned the thoughts of all those who met them. There was a substantial subculture forming that wouldn't meet Dumbledore in the eyes.

Also, another article in the Quibbler contained a transcript of that prophecy session between Dumbledore and Hermione/Trelawney, word for word, including his questions to her about controlling Harry (they'd viewed it in a pensieve to record), the article was entitled "Trelawney's Last Interview."

Both were creating substantial undercurrents of discontent while leaders who owed their lives and careers to Dumbledore sought to defend him up in higher reaches of power.

Sirius was not disturbed. You couldn't eat an elephant in one bite. Why should it be easy to destroy the political powers of Dumbledore, when he'd been building those up for more than a century? No one had more power than the old man. You'd probably get as far saying things against Hitler back in good old Nazi Germany. So many careers would go down with his that even those who knew he was guilty were defending him.

It was worse than getting Lucius Malfoy on trial would've been.

Sirius Black, no longer fugitive, smiled as he folded the paper and went back into his new cottage. Amelia's contact had been good to him, helping him get access to his finances almost as soon as he got exonerated. Hermione also had an uncle in France, which explained why she often went there during her summer holidays. But the man had been a font of useful information, helping the no-longer-fugitive Black find a property quickly. The man could hardly help Sirius enough once the escapee had mentioned that the sooner he could get a place prepared, the sooner his beloved niece could move out of England and transfer to a school in the south of France.

Together they'd found a struggling vineyard and having had enough cash he'd purchased the property straight away, without going

through the silly hoops that banks and mortgage companies required. Whatever problems muggles had with houses were easily fixed by magic, so the paperwork was pointless.

In a few weeks, they'd have warding specialists visit. He'd already made the earliest possible appointment. And a French hospital had prescribed a regime of treatments and potions to correct the long term exposure to dementors and other general malnutrition and aftereffects of the horrors of Azkaban.

He already gotten a replacement wand, new clothing, and was beginning to feel like a new man. Amelia was even coming by sometime in the next few days to get his testimony about the whole affair, and he was thinking about giving her a candlelit dinner at a good restaurant, just to see if he still had it.

No, for the first time in a long while, it was good to be Sirius Black.

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Amelia Bones sat in her office feeling tremendously disturbed, facing the single most significant decision of her young life.

Promotions had come quickly to those in the auror corps who'd survived the dire days during the last war. She'd not been long out of Hogwarts before being rushed through an abbreviated auror training program and pushed out into service. So far as she could tell nothing of any significance had been skipped, cramming what was ordinarily a three year course into nine months. But that was contrasting feverishly intense proto-soldiers, already highly motivated to defend their families, to laid back peacetime cops.

Frankly, Amelia quietly suspected she'd gotten a better education, those nine months of intensive study with diamond-hard emotional drives, than her modern recruits got in their three years of snoring through boring lectures.

There was also small question as to why she'd become drawn back to thinking of the 'bad old days' of the fight against Voldemort.

Yesterday the head of the DMLE had most of her precious illusions shattered. To start with, there had been that fearsome Prophet expose, revealing all sorts of deviltry and shady business on the part of the wizarding world's most trusted figure. As if that hadn't been enough, mere minutes after she had finished reading her paper, Albus himself had come storming into the halls of the Ministry of Magic at the head of her own aurors and not-so-quietly taken control of the building at wand-point, proving in her mind the majority of the Prophet's statements to be true.

That had been reality shattering enough, but then she'd been personally obliterated by the Headmaster himself.

Her mind had been saved by a chance mishap, either good luck on her part or bad on the part of the Headmaster, she couldn't tell which. After giving him temporary command of her aurors, whereupon he instructed them to go out and commit war crimes, obliterating the entire magical population of this incident, Amelia had been saved by chancing to see the headline of one of those papers again, and being forced by the 'Must Read' compulsion to sit down and go through it all over again.

The shock of reading that a second time had enabled her to throw off the Headmaster's obliteration. The justice loving witch was frothing at the mouth with how Dumbles just retook control over the Ministry right in front of her! But by then her aurors were scattered all over Britain acting on his orders instead of hers. Direct action would be pointless, as due to the instructions he'd given them, they simply would've obliterated her all over again if they sensed she didn't support Albus. And he still maintained that control. He had not relinquished it yet.

Still, she wasn't the head of the DMLE for nothing. She had some brains in her head, and if direct action was out, indirect would do for now.

Amelia had made the switch from front-line auror to desk jockey admin type during the last war for a reason, and it wasn't that she was incompetent with a wand or feared the Death Eaters. No, it was because the line types needed support and back then they weren't

getting it. Besides, she'd always had a gift for getting things done despite red tape.

She also wore a monocle with all the powers of Moody's magical eye not because she was paranoid, but because sometimes they really were out to get you. Besides, she felt, as the head of the DMLE, that she had more obligation than anybody to see the truth.

But she also knew that the admin types could either be your best friends or worst enemies. So she'd settled down to hamstringing the Headmaster by any means available to her on that day of chaos. Among other things she saw to it that newspapers gathered inside of the Ministry were not destroyed, but rather collected and secreted away.

She'd been partway through plans for how to cripple the Headmaster, cutting away at his power base and influence (starting with getting her aurors to read those papers she'd saved the moment he released control of them) when the Wireless broadcast that interview with Snape.

Amelia had been thinking of a quiet campaign that would steadily undermine Dumbledore's power. Then the Wireless had to drop the bomb about him plotting to raise the last Dark Lord. The fact he was willing to do so just because he needed a distraction drove her into fury!

Countless good men and women had died in the last war, including most of Amelia's family and friends. Now Dumbledore was going to start the terror all over again just because he wanted to divert some attention off himself?

Once upon a time, she'd felt Voldemort was as bad as it could get. Now she realized that they already lived under a Dark Lord who was far worse, one whose power and callousness toward others shamed even the famous Dark Slytherin. And by the time she'd realized he was a threat, he was already in control of the magical world. He'd won. The victory all Dark Lords eventually sought was not only his, but had been for a long time.

That brought her back to the question. She'd woken up to the fact that a Dark Lord was in control of Magical Britain. Did she, or did she not, dare to do something about it? And, if so, what could she accomplish?

She had to admit to feeling completely outclassed and having no idea what to do. The man was virtually unstoppable. All ordinary routes were impossible to pursue in light of his popularity, influence and both personal and political power. Heck! Half the offices necessary to begin the process of pursuing a campaign against a Dark Lord were held by the man himself! Dumbledore was so entrenched in their government that she honestly didn't know if she could take him down him without destroying their world in the process.

Shaking herself mentally, Amelia looked over the report on her desk. The Ministry's wardstones getting stolen might truly be a blessing in disguise. If she could work this right, she'd hopefully make it impossible for the Supreme Mugwump to get power over those wards again.

It wasn't much, but it would be a start.

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Hermione stroked a feather left behind by the Headmaster's bird. "Evidently Fawkes wouldn't mind being free. And he knows things about fires, so while it may seem random to us, he might have all sorts of resources for watching lots of fires, or knowing when and where an ashwinder would spawn."

Luna made an agreeing noise in the back of her throat. "Poor Fawkes. He probably doesn't like being enslaved to Dumbledore any more than any human would. Probably the experience is much harder for a phoenix as they are light creatures and Dumbles is anything but. I wonder how long he's been looking for opportunities to get free."

Harry shrugged. "Fawkes would have to obey his orders so long as he stays bound. But I find it unlikely in the extreme that Albus specifically ordered him not to deliver any ashwinders to people."

Hermione nodded, then continued thoughtfully. "I'd guess Dumbledore never really saw Fawkes as more than a bird - a symbol, not an intelligent, active being of his own. He would've given him what he thought were a complete set of instructions, not thinking about him trying to find ways around those."

Luna nodded agreeably. "That is part of what makes the fey notorious - we can be forced to make certain actions, but we retain our free wills, so will constantly try to pervert the instructions we are given. I'd imagine Fawkes has an even stronger will than we do."

Harry stopped hissing out instructions to the ashwinder and stood up. "Well, the ritual to free Fawkes takes a full two weeks. Fortunately we have enough time before the Fall Equinox. We have enough time plus a little, but it still serves us best to get started right away."

"Right," they all confirmed.

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The new day after the Prophet Disaster (as it was almost universally called) was almost as hectic as the previous, as Albus had to send out his already-controlled forces of aurors and obliviators to contain damage once again, due this time to the broadcast the previous night over the Wizarding Wireless Network revealing him plotting like a functioning Dark Lord.

Openly planning to return Voldemort as a distraction upset quite a few souls.

The reaction wasn't as extreme as the paper's had been, after all it lacked the same compulsions to believe it, and many had felt it to be a joke (and one in bad taste at that). But it had also enjoyed more time to fester before the Headmaster learned about it. So it was much harder to effectively erase, as many families had already left Britain or taken other precautions.

Still, this was to be their 'Normal Day', and the trio were determined to spend at least some parts of it trying out new parts of their routines.

They woke up very early that morning on the shore of the lake after a vigorous hour long workout including laps around the lake (both swimming and running), calisthenics and aerobic exercises.

It was not expertly planned, but it was enthusiastically executed.

Harry also cast spells meant for helping people recall their dreams, so they could each remember those workouts so they'd know how and where they needed to modify them to improve. In truth, they needed so much and knew so little that wasn't much help. It only let them recall more pain.

Having slept through their first workout, they'd expected to wake up sore and tired. What they did not expect was just how sore and tired. Having slept through the experience it was not monitored by the conscious mind, which holds back when it can, but the subconscious mind, which obeys fewer limits. As a direct result their bodies had been running closer to full out, and they were not physically ready for anything like that.

But there Harry's nutritional regime came into play. Back when he'd first stopped by the Ministry building to register complaints about the Dursleys, the Healers had put him on stuff for correcting the damage. By now taking them was automatic for the boy, and he noticed when he did the pain of sore muscles immediately went down.

Having compassion on the girls, he immediately shared with them, reducing their pain to something manageable. Healing potions prepared ahead of time for healing muscle tissue damage and bruising and things corrected most of the rest, leaving them a little wobbly but overall alright.

They'd already noticed Harry's nutritional potions and things for healing the long-term neglect and abuse had finally started filling out and building muscles up on his human form. Now they elected to try it as supplements for their physical workouts. If it built up muscles without work, why not with?

Besides, anything to make the pain more manageable had to be considered.

So, while they woke up sore, within a short while they were not half so sore as they deserved to be, and they immediately resolved to have more potions from his nutritional regime handy every morning.

Bellatrix had brought out of the LeStrange vaults enough suits of living silver armor for the group to wear, not only the trio but herself as well. However, Luna had taken a chance to stop in on the Darling (formerly Malfoy) vaults to pick up a set she liked better, one made by a better smith than the others. The suit Bella brought her they could give to Trelawney.

All of these would be going through the fire protection ritual shortly, as soon as they had a chance to run it again.

Currently the Goblet of Fire with the trio of enhanced dragons breathing on it was tied up in the ritual to free Fawkes. Luckily, like Harry had said, they had enough time to do that and still get in one or two more of the fire protection rituals before they lost the Summer Solstice and the magical clearing reset to holding on to the mystic properties of the Fall Equinox.

Harry had also taken an opportunity to do a bit of magical creature research.

Ashwinders lived under an hour. They were ash grey snakes spawned by fires that had burned out of control, and in their few moments of life they sought out dark corners in which to lay their brilliant red eggs - eggs that gave off such intense heat that within minutes they inevitably started fires. Wizards were cautioned that if they saw the trail of an ashwinder coming out of a fire to track it down and find the nest so they could freeze the eggs, which were valuable ingredients in love potions, and would otherwise destroy the building.

So, Harry's question was: if those snakes spawned randomly from fires why did they lay eggs? You would think that a creature magically created more or less out of thin air would not feel a need to reproduce itself as its one driving urge during those few, short moments of life.

But they did.

The only thing ashwinders ever did during their perilously short lives was seek out a dark place to nest and lay their eggs there. And it was more than just a need to create fires. There were plenty of ways to burn things, you needn't go through all the effort of forming powerful magic eggs to do it. You could breathe flame, or have a hot hide, or use any number of methods. Fire was easy to create. Also, further evidence on this point, those few times that a wizard got careless and didn't notice the nest in time, as the house was burning down there weren't any newborn ashwinders slithering out.

So Harry wanted to find out why they laid eggs, and to do that he first tried to ask, but ashwinders weren't very bright. They didn't know. They just felt this driving urge. So he determined to hatch some. It was no trouble at all to get the ashwinder they had to produce a set of eggs. Provide a dark nest and there you go, instant set of brilliant, glowing red ashwinder eggs.

Figuring they were hot, so they wanted to be hot (and ones frozen for use in love potions could be kept on a shelf forever waiting to be used and never did anything) he tossed some in a kiln.

Actually, he had six, so two got tossed inside of a kiln, two got tossed inside of the Goblet of Fire (which promptly burned them up, so he figured that was too hot - and it was running at full power 'brilliant blazing ruby glowing from within and sheathed in flame from without' at the moment) and two he gave to Trelawney to keep in a campfire.

These last two were sort of a dual experiment. He needed to know if there was anything special about a wood fueled fire to the eggs, and Trelawney had plenty of detritus composed of other people's wood she wanted to burn up to get her clearing safe and cleaner. But also she was going to use their nest as a cooking fire, and he wanted to know if that affected her potions.

He didn't know if anything would come of this, but he figured he'd never know if someone didn't try an experiment and see.

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Dumbledore had had very little time lately to play up the 'caring Headmaster' persona, but there were certain things you could not neglect overlong before they spawned crises of their own. One of them was keeping up an image, and without the portraits of previous headmasters and headmistresses to act as his drama coaches, maintenance of his kindly grandfather air was something he dared not neglect, as he doubted he was currently able to perform proper repairs should he, in some way, damage it.

Besides, it was good policy to be seen around, doing the 'meet and greet' of faculty and students on any day before making a grand announcement, and the new security protocols would not be a popular change.

Ah, well. Losing their precious freedoms for the Greater Good was something they ought to get used to.

Also, putting image entirely aside for the time being, he needed to know if any of the obliviates performed recently had begun slipping. With luck as bad as his had been, he could not trust all the aurors to have done a precise job in every case. So it would be wise to check.

As part of his rounds around the school, Dumbledore stopped by the Hospital Wing, seeing all the beds filled. Regrettably, the needed steps to procure the return of his students had resulted in any number of injuries, and within the halls were loads of broken people, including Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell. Oliver Wood had escaped during the fighting.

He would have to do something about that. He'd made a friendly wager with Severus that Gryffindor would win the Quidditch Cup this year, and they could not do so if cut down by nearly half a team.

He would release some of his stores of phoenix tears to Poppy to get those, and perhaps a few other, students back on their feet again quickly. Also the mandrakes he'd special ordered from Tibet and China would be arriving soon, and he had sent for a generous enough quantity that he could release some for the making of Restorative Draughts for students. That would take care of the worst of the damage, though he would have to decide what to do about

replacing Oliver Wood. The position of Keeper was something he'd promised to Ronald Weasley in exchange for services rendered. But that was planned for later, when he'd arranged for bets on that team to lose.

Something would have to be done in the interim. He would not be the one who had to polyjuice into a girl and hang out at the red light district of Knockturn, turning all money made over to the victor. He'd arranged that wager to take Severus down a peg, prove to him that he was not as great as he sometimes felt, not to demean himself.

Besides, Albus didn't have the time. Things with this Colonel were moving too rapidly to take time out for fun. He would simply have to arrange a better Keeper for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, one who could be trusted to not be there in a year or two when he needed the lions to lose.

Pondering over this, and who to choose, Dumbledore made his way to the Great Hall, well before the food was to be served, so he could be seen at breakfast as the students started to trickle in.

Unbeknownst to the Headmaster (who'd had his mind busy on other things) one of the many problems he'd been overlooking as he dealt with more urgent priorities was the House Elf population of the castle had taken not one but two substantial hits lately. The first came when Harry, holder of several of the Founders Artifacts, had hired away roughly half his help to serve on his own projects. The second great hit was yesterday, when he'd sent them out to go collect all of the Daily Prophet papers they could, and most of the little elves had run into hastily erected wards, never to return.

The sum total of this was the previously plentiful to overflowing Hogwarts staff of House Elves had been diminished to the point where it was no longer able to service the basic needs of the castle. A tremendous stroke of bad luck, but something they had to deal with.

Where once they'd had over four hundred, now they had fourteen elves.

Down in the kitchens there simply were not enough elves to prepare the food. Even stripping the cleaning staff to the bone and neglecting all but the most mandatory spying roles, they did not have enough elves to get even half the customary amount of food prepared; even if they cut out all of the frivolity and made only the simplest and easiest to prepare dishes.

While that food was previously prepared in generous portions (the elves got to eat the leftovers), they still could not manage to feed more than three quarters of the students on the newly reduced amount of cooking, to say nothing of the purebloods who ordered customary dishes and home recipes which were hard to prepare in the best of times, or of vacuums like Ron Weasley. Feeding those would cause many other students to go hungry (to say nothing of leaving no food left over for the elves themselves to eat).

The crisis had to be dealt with, and the Headmaster was busy enough to have been neglecting their calls for direction. So, having been forbidden to speak to McGonagall about certain things, the miserable elves were left to make do as best they knew how.

There were several unalterable priorities to a Hogwarts House Elf, and one of those was that the Students Must Be Fed! So, since the elves themselves were too few to do all of the cooking, they altered their shopping priorities for the morning and picked up some already prepared food.

No one had ever put hamburgers or pizza on the 'approved' list, and certainly not Chinese take out. So the little elves did what they could and found a place selling what seemed a traditional and long approved dish: Fried Chicken.

And that was why the Headmaster shrieked like a little girl when, as the first few faculty and students of the day appeared and breakfast got served, he beheld a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken sitting at every place.

"Don't! It will kill us all!" he shrieked as McGonagall reached for a piece.

Between the time it took to reassure him (and test the food - which was all perfectly acceptable, and the gravy very tasty), breakfast had gone into full swing. The hall was full, and it was time for the mail to arrive.

Albus' eyes grew round with shocked horror as he beheld the tide of red envelopes descending on the Head Table - specifically, him.

One thing Dumbledore had neglected in all his cleanup efforts, something that had plain slipped his mind.

The Howlers.

Thousands of them, worse that practically each and every one wanted to shout out words and phrases he'd rather people not know. The people around him had forgotten the events those missives wanted to shout. The SENDERS of those messages had forgotten them, but the howlers had been in transit and unaffected by the great purge.

Yet he couldn't let people overhear them. Shout a secret out loud in public and it was no longer a secret.

The Headmaster ran shrieking to his office, chased by flocks of hundreds or even thousands of red letters, already forming into mouths to yell angry phrases disclosing all sorts of what should have been well kept secrets.

His staff stared curiously after him.

As he barricaded himself in his tower, Dumbledore began cursing. He had to do something about this luck. With his luck this bad his brother might, next wizengamot session, bring around a few goats painted up with makeup and dresses and demand that they get to vote.

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Author's Notes:

It has been pointed out, correctly, that I spend too much time initiating events and too little describing the aftereffects and backlashes. This chapter makes some attempt to rectify that situation.

This next really belongs to a previous chapter, but, hey, I'll say it here.

At first I was skeptical about the whole "Dumbledore cast the Fidelius over the Potters home" deal. But then I did some research.

It is a canon fact that Dumbledore cast a charm to protect the Potter home. Now the Fidelius was the only charm ever mentioned as having been cast over that home; also the only 'charm' EVER placed on properties (everything else put on homes is called a ward), so going by a 'strictly canon' viewpoint, only one charm was cast: the Fidelius - and Albus Dumbledore cast it.

Anything else requires us to make up something that doesn't appear in the books.

But whether or not it was the Fidelius Charm does not matter, he knew who the secret keeper was. Either he cast the charm, in which case he had to know whom to put the secret into, or he had to learn the location (which he demonstrably knew) from the secret keeper. He could not have learned the secret of its location otherwise. The only way to know is to be told by the secret keeper.

So Albus Dumbledore knew that Sirius Black could not have betrayed the Potters. Yet he sent him to rot in jail anyway.

And regarding Albus 'Identify people by faint magical signatures' Dumbledore learning the location from a note: wizards don't type. With the exception of major publications like books and newspapers, everything is handwritten; and a note written by anything other than the actual Secret Keeper, say like a magic quill, would probably not count as being 'told by the keeper'. He could tell the quill, but the quill then telling you doesn't count as him telling you.

So there is no such thing as anonymous notes. Not like we are used to.

Dumbledore's read the handwriting of all the magical people he cares to, and HE'S actually given enough brains to recognize people by faint clues such as handwriting (or magical signatures - like in a magically significant note).

So, even given a note, he'd know who it was, especially given that he works closely with these people and cares to know more about them. Besides, handwriting analysis exists for a reason: different people have different writing styles based on their background and personality. And you can't tell me that a confident and collected man raised in an aristocratic household could have handwriting mistaken for a pathetic sycophant who wasn't. Their handwriting would not only be different, but dramatically so.

Harry could miss such clues. Dumbledore wouldn't. So, regardless of whether he's told by note or in person, he would know who it was who held the secret. And 'magically forging' the handwriting would almost certainly destroy the value of the note, just as cutting apart and pasting together the magnetic code bar on the back of a credit card would. Same deal here. The magic requires that HE tell you. Distorting or disguising who 'he' is fights against the operative principle at work here, as it was described. If I were to mess around with the order of the little numbers on one of my security code keys to 'change their style' it wouldn't unlock anything anymore.

You don't hide information from Dumbles when he wants to know. Sorry. And he's always been obsessive about anything to do with that prophecy. Even with two possible children, he would've learned all he could about BOTH!

And as for 'put the secret first in this person, then in that one' we are given no indication in the books that such a switch is possible AFTER the spell is cast! In fact, the magical world regards who has the secret as unalterable.

Likewise, the 'spellcaster forgets all about the spell after it was cast' is not reflected in the books. Only the secret itself is hidden, not anything else.

Chapter Forty by Lionheart

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I find it endlessly ironic that we amateurs are held to higher standards than the professionals.

Anti-Note rant added to ANs on previous chapter, if you care to see it.

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Breakfast was an unusually subdued affair, what with the Headmaster having run screaming from the Head Table, and all the unease from the upset the previous day. Even though the majority could remember nothing of what had gone on, there were still disturbing signs, such as belongings having been left about by folks escaping in haste. Also, a prominent section of the school was at least aware of what day it was, and thus had unresolved questions about what had gone on the previous day that they could not recall - like the librarian missing her books that ought to have been returned.

Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on your point of view, their muggle studies professor was one of those who'd escaped. So Hermione, who found she liked teaching when she'd been impersonating Trelawney, simply saw her chance when she noticed the Deputy Headmistress fretting over what to do about the aura of unease, and went up and offered her a suggestion.

Smiles and nods could be seen on both parties.

Soon the Deputy Headmistress had stood up and rung her spoon against her glass for attention, which she received. She then announced, "Please remain in your seats after breakfast, everyone. Since Professor Burbage has left us to pursue a career at nasal exploration," and here the Fey Trio had to bite their lips to avoid exploding in laughter at the lame excuses the cover-up team had thought up! "We will be receiving a presentation on muggle life by one of our prominent muggleborns. Attendance will be mandatory."

Those in the know could see the relief on McGonagall's face over having a distraction available from the tension as she sat down. It was plain the poor woman didn't know what she was distracting them from, her own unease was just as plain on her face as the relief was. The woman was just struggling hard to keep things working at her beloved school.

They had to wonder if Dumbledore appreciated her work much, or at all.

"Why do we have to stay and listen to the mudblood?" Draco sneered loudly.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she reminded herself they still hadn't killed him yet. Anyone who'd try to murder one of her very few friends deserved no help or comfort from her! Still, she managed to plaster on a plastic smile as she answered, "Oh, I just thought you'd all like to see some of what muggles are capable of!"

Then she skipped off to her table, grinning widely.

"Bloody mental," Ron shook his head, and Harry had to remind himself not to blast the moronic traitor off into next week. Given sufficient provocation, though, and he could challenge the youngest male Weasley to a duel. And he honestly expected that would be the end. He doubted he'd be able to bring himself to kill his former friend, but driving him off would be easy.

After the breakfast dishes were cleared and all the food put away, Hermione enlisted Harry's help in setting up a film projector, having already sent Dobby back to his room for the appropriate movie.

As he was finishing getting the setup installed, and Luna had enlisted two of the professors to charm the far wall white and featureless for the next two hours or so, Hermione addressed the now curious room, a twinkle visibly tugging at the side of her face. "Muggles have moving pictures also, but they're of a different type. Rather than reacting to what's around them, they are made to tell a story."

Harry stood, having completed his job and fighting a grin of his own. Joining Hermione with his arm around her waist, he added his voice to hers. "We thought you'd like to see what the muggles are up to."

Harry and Hermione stood back and smiled as the picture appeared and the famous song began to roll, "When you're seeing thangs, and they don't look good. Who ya gunna call?" and the resounding choral cry of, "Ghostbusters!"

Fighting giggles, the pair looked on at the first magical showing of the movie Ghostbusters. At first they saw disbelief and amazement on the faces of the purebloods, mirrored on most of the halfbloods, which gradually faded as the film progressed.

By the time the proto-Ghostbuster team had met the ghostly librarian in the basement at the start of the film, the entire audience was enraptured - and not a few of Hogwarts' own ghosts were in attendance, with more showing up and appearing out of the walls every minute.

Standing back and watching, the duo were puzzled for a while as even Luna seemed perfectly caught up in the film. Hermione was having a difficult time parsing their reactions, until she finally made the connection.

"Harry!" she whispered aside. "I get it now, why the students fell so hard for the Lord of the Rings movies! Look at them!"

He did. Shock, wonder and amazement were prevalent. McGonagall had nervelessly dropped a scone she'd saved from breakfast and was staring slack-jawed at the screen, and hers was among the more tame reactions of the staff.

"Think about it," Hermione insisted. "The wizard-raised have no clue what muggles are capable of. They can't even get the way we DRESS right! No one could expect anyone that ignorant to know what muggle technology can or cannot do. Besides, do you recall the old phrase, 'A picture never lies'? In the muggle world people no longer say that, because pictures have been lying for ages. You could put

my head on a lion's body if you liked. But wizards never got past that. They still believe what they see!"

Indeed, the story unfolding in the film struck the wizard-raised as perfectly rational and reasonable. They were a bit surprised to see muggles doing that sort of stuff, but they'd never understood muggle technology anyway so devices that flung ropes of light tying up ghosts, or trapping them in little boxes, didn't seem outside the realm of possibility.

Actually, flinging beams of light from clunky, overlarge wand-type things was far too normal for the wizards to object to, save to wonder how the muggles had gotten things that looked so familiar to the magic-raised.

Obviously the backpack attached to those clunky rod/wand things was in some way meant to make up for not being magical themselves.

A slow grin dawned over Harry's face. "And what they are seeing is..."

"Muggles dealing with ghosts." Hermione concluded for him, just as the majority of the ghost population in the room (which was, by now, the majority of spirits in the castle) cringed and trembled as the movie team made their first successful catch. "The hard part for muggles to accept is the ghosts, but wizards are already passed that. They know ghosts exist. They see them here at school every day. So the hardest part of this story to accept is already regarded as fact. While the technology... Well," she drawled, smiling. "Wizards don't have the slightest clue what muggles are capable of. They've already accepted that muggles can fly using helicopters and airplanes and such. They don't know how we do it, only that we can."

"And this is the same thing." Harry realized, comprehension dawning.

Hermione nodded, cheeks split with the force of her grin. "Yes, it's exactly the same. They accepted muggles could fly when they saw us flying around. They never understood how, they just accepted that we could. The actual principles involved would mean nothing to them, even if they were explained. So they have no accurate way of

knowing what we can or cannot do - except what they see us doing. Now they've 'seen' muggles using more tools they don't understand to catch ghosts and keep them in boxes."

"And they're really going to believe that muggles can." Harry's grin matched hers for intensity. He met her eyes. "You realize the possibilities for abuse in this?"

Ron twisted around in his seat and gave them a firm and angry "SHHH!" and they shut up more out of surprise than anything, settling in to watch the rest of the film in an extremely thoughtful silence.

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After the film the staff disappeared into a meeting for which they'd dragged the Headmaster out of his study to discuss this clear evidence of a massive breach of the Statute of Secrecy: muggles not only hunting ghosts, but frankly and openly discussing rituals meant to end the world, possession by demons, and using those strange muggle backpack-equipped wands!

This was important, even if it was in America.

Dumbledore went to this emergency meeting extremely confused, as he'd not stayed around to see the film, having been busy with other necessities.

Surprisingly, Myrtle showed up to the trio completely unruffled by the movie. Most of the ghosts in the castle were terrified by this new information about the dangers of treacherous muggles catching and holding them, but she wasn't.

It was so out of place that Luna had to ask why not.

To that, Myrtle replied with an unconcerned shrug. "Oh, I have no doubt Harry here would save me. He never lets his friends down. Now," she directed a stern gaze to the two muggleborn fey. "I've run out of material, and you two promised to help me grade the papers everyone's turned in. So I need a new projection picture to show my

classes, and you two are to help me tonight to grade the essays written for the old ones. Is that alright?"

Weakly recalling that Myrtle had more or less taken over those History of Magic classes, with some help from them, the duo agreed dumbly.

"What are we going to show her?" Hermione whispered fiercely just after the ghost and most of the students, including Luna, had left the Great Hall.

In response, Harry shrugged. "Well, I could let her show Conan the Barbarian. But all I have is the version edited for American television."

Hermione thought about it, blinking for several moments before reluctantly choosing for him, "That's probably better, Harry. They cut out all of the sex and nudity, and we aren't old enough to be watching that, much less showing it to other children our age."

"Good, because I'd really wanted to show this one." The boy firmed up.

"Why is that?"

"Think about it." He grinned. "The whole film is shown from the perspective of a guy fighting an evil sorcerer. We WANT young witches and wizards to think in terms of standing up to villains! And it doesn't hurt that the bad guy of the piece loves snakes. Really it's not the worst thing that he has a total snake fetish. He uses them as arrows, models all his architecture on them, and even turns into one."

"Not the worst thing?" She challenged in surprise.

"Yup!" Harry grinned. "Because he also he feeds his followers to them, and we want people to think in terms of 'why do I want to follow a guy who might decide to turn me into snake food?'"

Hermione thought about it, before sprouting a wide grin, grabbing his arm and dragging him off, declaring, "You're right. It's absolutely perfect!"

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Firenze was waiting for them by the edge of the lake. The centaur was easy to recognize, even at a distance, by his white-blond hair and a palomino body. Up close this recognizability was further refined by his astonishingly blue eyes.

Today was the day they had agreed to meet the centaur for archery training.

As the walk along the broad lawn to their teacher would take the trio a couple of minutes, Harry inquired aside to Hermione, "So, did your research turn up much of what we are about to learn?"

The bushy haired girl shook her head, biting her lip in concern. "Not much. In our day archery is just a sport, and sports bear almost no resemblance to the ancient fighting arts they are based on. In modern fencing, for example, it is a tragedy if someone gets hurt, and through rules and new equipment they've rendered that nearly impossible to do. But in the ancient art hurting someone was the whole point, and happened all the time. Also, the new equipment and rules change things to the point that the modern sport fencer does virtually nothing an ancient fencer would recognize, and I fear archery may be the same. But I do wonder what kind of bows he will train us to use."

"Is that important?" Luna gave an otherworldly blink to ask.

"Vital." Hermione answered with a decisive nod. "The typical shortbow has a 45 to 50 pound draw, just enough to kill a deer. A shortbow is drawn to the eye so you can sight down the shaft. This improves accuracy and ease of use. Most cultures around the world used the shortbow for hunting, and so most archers sent into combat were shortbow archers, because those were what they had available to draft. But they did so poorly no commanders ever relied on them, and they had a negligible effect on a battle's outcome. They just had

too short range and too low power to be useful or reliable against the troops who faced them."

Hermione drew herself slightly taller, gaining confidence. "Nobody builds a bow bigger than they need. Heavier draws mean extra work, and that extra effort was wasted hunting deer or bison or what have you. So they used the minimum power to get the job done, and when it came time to fight battles they used the tools they already had available. It takes years to build up the arm strength to wield heavier bows, so mostly they didn't bother. Many did not even realize they could! They had no experience to show what heavier bows could be used for, so no cause to go through the extra effort. But what was good for hunting, taking down deer caught by surprise, was inadequate for punching through armor. Anyone with a shield could almost ignore them, and shields were so cheap as to be readily available to anyone who wanted one, so even lightly armed troops carried them. Archers did some damage, mostly to the careless or unlucky, but barely enough to justify their use on a battlefield. Some very powerful armies employed no regular corps of archers at all - Rome, for one. Just because the shortbow was not a decisive weapon, and they could readily hire mercenary shortbow archers if they wanted some for a particular campaign or engagement."

Hermione wet her lips, getting more fully into lecture mode. "The longbow, on the other hand, so called because you could expect a six foot bow with a three foot arrow, was much more powerful, and appears quite rarely. Only a handful of cultures ever used them. It is not a tool for hunting so much as a weapon of war, and draws of 200 pounds were relatively standard, enough to punch through both sides of an armored knight AND his shield. However they drew to the ear, making it more difficult to sight along a shaft for accuracy. Men had to train daily from a very young age to use them. But a general able to field units of them could dominate a battlefield quite easily. In the battle of Agincourt they slaughtered thousands of fully armored French knights, while the English lost less than a hundred troops overall."

The Granger girl glanced aside at her companions apprehensively. "I guess it matters most to us in the time commitment. If Firenze is going to teach us archery on the shortbow, we'll be decent in a

couple of weeks. It's an easy bow to learn to use, which is why most everyone used it. But if it's longbow, we could be students of his for a decade or more, at least."

The girl sucked in her lower lip and, nibbling on it, faced forward, where they were walking. "It's just, I'm not sure which I prefer. On one hand I am unsure of the amount of time I want to commit to this; and on the other, I am very curious to see if we could master the superior art. There HAS to be some use for it, even today! The longbow was the machine gun of the Middle Ages: accurate, deadly, possessed of a long range and rapid rate of fire. No other weapon compared. The flight of its missiles was compared to a storm, and entire armies got evaporated by it. The longbow was superior in every way to the black powder firearms that eventually replaced it - every way save one, that is. Longbows are difficult to master and require years of dedicated training, while any moron can use a gun effectively."

Then the girl thought about it and seemed to shrug. "Although modern things they call longbows are built for sport shooting and typically have a draw of 60 pounds or less. Modern bowmen capable of using even a hundred pound draw bows accurately are vanishingly rare, and there are just a handful able to reach a 180 pound draw - enough to prove to skeptics that records of full-time archers able to reach the full 200 pound draws are accurate. So I guess it's too much to ask that we could be taught the authentic art. Nobody uses bows for combat anymore."

"Centaur's do," Luna stated calmly, turning to favor her friends with a serene smile. "It has always been one of their defining features."

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Firenze was an English centaur. They would be learning longbows. However, they would be starting on shortbows to learn some of the basics the easy way first, before moving on to the hard stuff.

That actually gave Hermione false relief/disappointment at first, when they walked up and saw a number of shortbows set up and ready. But the centaur quickly explained they had no muscles for this kind of labor, so they had to work up gradually. The shortbows he had

available had measly little ten pound draws, and even that would be exhausting them in short order, as they didn't have the kind of muscles or callouses built up for this.

"Archery is a very physical art," the centaur began, stamping a hoof for emphasis. "All of your accuracy, speed and power is derived directly from your own muscles. The bow is simply a tool for focusing that power at long range. Everything you do, all that you desire to accomplish, depends on your strength, speed and skill. The greater your physical capacities, the more powerful a bow you can wield. The more powerful the bow, the longer its range and the greater the damage caused by it. Normally, you would need a different bow for each draw strength as they increased in ability to reach harder and harder pulls."

The centaur snorted, tossing his head, and it took them a moment to parse that gesture as a happy one. "However, one thing that makes a dryad's bow unique is their ability, as living parts of the dryad who grants them, to adapt to the user as they grow in strength and ability. For beginners, this is vital, as it keeps them from having to continually replace their bows. However, for those who've already reached their maximum strength it is less interesting."

The centaur flexed a human arm. It took them a moment to realize what he was doing, as he didn't do it in a body builder way. But they could see, once they'd figured that out, that was a boast in his own ability.

Harry raised a hand. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, as the centaur looked at him. "But I was hoping you would explain some of the usefulness of archery in this day of wands and spells."

Firenze reared slightly. "A good question!" he declared. Then, with one smooth motion he reached behind his back for his bow, strung it, and fired an arrow off, clearing the lake by some distance to lodge in a tree on the other side, sinking in several inches.

Pivoting to face them again, he gave a contented tail flick.

"Virtually all spells are used within a distance of thirty yards. Most combat magic is actually cast in ten yards or less to your target, to make it harder to dodge. However, to qualify as an English longbowman of medieval times, a man had to hit a man-sized target twelve out of twelve times at a distance of two hundred yards. A longbow can kill a man at ranges greater than four hundred yards. Also, arrows are not as easily spotted as the balls of light your spells create. Nor do they move so slowly they can be easily dodged."

The trio all listened raptly to the centaur's explanation. All of them could see the advantage of being able to kill at ten times your enemy's max range.

Firenze grew serious and still. "There is a historical battle where two wizards under invisibility cloaks firing disillusioned arrows killed over four hundred invading goblins, and were never once spotted. They only broke off combat when they grew too exhausted to conjure more arrows."

"Wow!" Harry was impressed.

Firenze snorted. "And the remaining thousand goblins slaughtered every man, woman and child in the town those wizards had been protecting, butchering their carcasses to roast as meat. Just as they'd been intending to do before those two wizards launched their desperate, last ditch defense."

The trio paled dramatically.

"The goblins roasted and ate their own dead, also. Deeming the privilege of dining on goblin meat too great to leave the carcasses for their foes to devour," the centaur concluded. "As they have always assumed that all creatures do as they do and feast upon the corpses of their enemies. They just believe men and other creatures lie about it."

Now the trio looked like they were going to be sick.

"It was a town of four thousand people," Firenze instructed. "If they had been willing to fight for their own lives, they had enough to have

been able to drive off their attackers. Instead, they chose to rely on heroes, placing the safety of everyone in the hands of a few. The first lesson all centaur youth are taught is this: your safety is your own responsibility. Trusting someone else to guard your life makes you no better than a slave."

The centaur pawed a back hoof, staring at them haughtily. "Likewise, the safety of a community is the responsibility of that whole community. If any decide they will not defend themselves, they are to be left without defense by others. If they are unwilling to work or risk to be safe, they are unworthy of the privilege of enjoying security, and are cast out of the herd."

|||

Author's Notes:

Has anyone else noticed that witches and wizards tend to get in a giant game of "Not It!" when it comes to defending their lives? I mean, every one of the wizarding public almost seems to gloat, "Well, I'm not going to be bothered saving my life. YOU'D better do it for me!"

Chapter Forty-One

by Lionheart

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I'm not going to let myself be dragged into arguments with those who've listened to revisionists try to debunk history. The subject is infinite. I could carefully outline my facts in an argument as long as the rest of this story is already, and it would be wasted time and effort. They are not going to convince me, nor am I going to convince them.

But yes, I do commit the heresy of stating that the primary purpose of TV shows is to provide entertainment - NOT empirical evidence! And if you can't make that distinction, then I don't want to bother arguing with you.

So as easy, even as fun, as it would be to point out how FARCICAL some of those 'tests' and arguments they rely on would be, I will forebear. Ultimately it boils down to they want to believe what the boob tube has told them, or a teacher who has his own agenda (and it is quite fashionable now in academic circles to pretend that history began with the founding of the UN, and anyone before then was incapable of telling the truth), and I'm happy to let them.

|||

Snape cackled in glee.

Creatures such as him did not feel true happiness. Still, as far as vindictive pleasures went, this was as high as a demented human being could go.

Snape could nurse a grudge for ages. Indeed, he never forgave anyone the slightest hint of any snub against him. His grudge list was long, and extended to cover most members of society to one degree or another. But out of those, one had always stood above all!

Finally! He had the son of his schoolyard nemesis totally and wholly within his power! Ages ago embarrassments, disappointments, and, yes, jealousies could now be avenged!

He didn't know how it happened, but he wasn't going to argue with how the Headmaster had arranged it. It was enough that he could destroy now the son of the man who had ruined Snape's attempts to set himself up as his own dark lord, and not just a simpering toady of the current one.

Now, now however he could exact his revenge on the only remaining relative of the man to deny him the power and position that was rightfully his!

Being a follower of Lord Voldemort had never been his ambition. That had been a distant second place to the real goal. He'd always intended to be Lord Voldemort's rival, and eventually take over, consuming the lesser lord's followers into his own. But to do that Snape had needed the undiluted respect and admiration of Slytherin House from the very start, and one man had denied him that chance, standing up to the 'schoolyard bully' Snape and striking back in the most humiliating ways.

That humiliation had cost Snape his eventual dark lordship by taking away the very respect and admiration he'd needed, and Snape had nursed a seething hatred of the man ever since.

James Potter. Nothing was too cruel to inflict on him, or, by extension, his only living son. He cracked open a tooth and inserted a needle into the join, directly down into the nerve. That, by itself, would be bad enough, but the needle was coated with a potent toxin that would amplify the experience to an excruciating degree.

Snape had never learned to forgive. No, but he'd become expert on inflicting pain. First in his experiences as a Death Eater, then through muggleborn testing here at Hogwarts. Oh yes, he could cause unimaginable agony in any number of delightfully horrific ways, and having dreamed of this chance for ages, he'd determined to use them all, in public, on the son of his enemy!

Slytherin House, gathered by his command for this event, blanched and many of the weak fools lost the contents of their stomachs. Never mind, it would harden them up for later service; and the prefects

would keep them in order, even if they had to paralyze many of the lower years. Paralyzed was better than stunners, as that way they could still witness his everlasting triumph!

Snape had studied pain for ages. He did not have the innate genius of Bella, but he had a certain methodical workmanship that was in its own way more frightening; and in this case his vindictive glee inspired him to new and greater heights of inventiveness as he used knives, potion tools, a massive variety of dark curses, acids, disfiguring spells, and more to destroy every last hint of humanity in the object of his obsession!

The screaming had torn Draco's throat ragged and bloody long ago.

Snape never even considered that he might be under a Confundus charm to mistake the son of his greatest ally with that of his greatest enemy (both deceased), as he used every means at his disposal to prolong the suffering and urge every last ounce of agony out of the target of his aggressions. As far as he was concerned, he had the chance he'd always wanted, and was wringing it for all the humiliation and torment his target could suffer!

Slytherin House blanched, barfed and fainted (only to be revived by prefects) as Severus Snape reveled in the greatest degree of cruelty his mind could muster on the body of what was formerly his favorite student in the privacy of their common room.

The best thing was, Dumbledore was so busy he'd canceled classes for the day, and would not think to Obliviate this experience from their minds as Draco got both mind and body destroyed by their own Head of House.

|||

Gilderoy Lockhart was many things, most of them bad. However he had recently been turned around by one boy: Harry Potter, and now his life was going through some rather remarkable changes. A drive to learn was one, but a desire to help others and truly be the hero he'd so often portrayed himself as was stronger. Luckily, the two coincided.

The newly installed drive to work hard was making all that change possible.

After Harry had rebuilt his mind he'd left a Time Turner with him for training, and charged him to keep its use secret. Those orders had been followed, and Gilderoy had high hopes that, with the aid of his tutors and his new drive to work hard, he might someday soon be able to call himself as competent at magic in general as an average third year; although it was probably going to take him a good six months of solid work to do it, two using the Time Turner.

Another year of solid work and he'd probably be able to sit for his OWLS with reasonable competency. The work to catch up took longer as the material grew more complicated. It would probably take another two years after that before he could reasonably expect to conquer his NEWT level material, to say nothing of the heroic levels he'd portrayed himself as having; and ultimately would have to reach in truth in order to achieve his goals.

That would take another twenty years, at least.

Obviously, he would not be taking the tests again, that was just a handy judge of where his skills would be: competent to handle this, competent to handle that, and so on. He'd cheated on those tests the first time around, gotten the good grades required for a Ministry job (and learned that most who had Ministry jobs had also cheated for their grades). But this time his goal was to actually learn the material, and he was taking hard courses now to prepare him for a far more arduous role: A leader in society instead of fluff.

So the Time Turner was absolutely vital, as they did not have twenty three or twenty four years to wait. Even eight was probably too long. The war was going on now, and they already had him pursuing a leadership role.

They'd been forced to. Gilderoy's fan club provided them the only source of followers loyal to their cause rather than someone else's.

But, naturally, as the gap between where his skills actually were and where they needed to be (and where he'd always boasted they'd been) decreased, the task of keeping his fraud secret got easier and the less he had to fake. The more genuine he could be, the more he could accomplish, and the better off their side would be in the upcoming conflicts.

Of course, any time they could shave off that would be of great benefit to them and their cause; because it was not only Gilderoy that had to be trained to a higher standard, but all of their new corps of followers as well.

Toward that end the man was looking into a shortcut that Miss Granger had proposed and Harry had seconded: Magically compulsive books.

Gilderoy did not know where they'd come by a magical printing press. Truth be told, he did not care to know. While there was a vague chance they'd built it, as the Lovegoods had already done that once and they had the newest one of that family in their little club, it was far more likely they acquired it by some illegal measures. But what he didn't know he couldn't admit to, even under truth serum.

Two things made him strongly suspect they'd stolen the machine. The first was their moving it out to the newly acquired Dog Patch, the vineyard owned by their recently escaped friend in southern France (and how did he know they'd moved it there? Simple. Gilderoy himself had carried the shrunken press to that location in his pockets).

Any printing press in England was as good as a gold mine, there were so few legal ones in use there. Moving it out made no sense, unless they ran the risk of running afoul of the anti-illegal-printing-press wards over the country (better maintained than the Underage Magic Detection charms). They could also be trying to get it away from Dumbledore's influence, so it was not guaranteed illegal, just likely.

The other reason was the press itself was so laden with compulsive magics to layer over whatever it printed that... Well, in the first place he didn't believe three teens, no matter how talented, could create

such a web of compulsive magics; and in the second it matched rather closely what the international press was screaming about the Daily Prophet had been doing.

Still, even though he suspected they'd stolen it, he didn't know for certain, and was happy to keep it that way.

Now he was going to take advantage of his vacation in southern France to try out printing a few books using that wonderful press. Gilderoy himself was, he admitted with no small degree of pride, something of an expert on memory charms, and that came with a certain awareness of how a mind works. He was hoping to become a legilimencer someday. But for now he was highly qualified for studying the reaction of the minds of a few of his followers to reading The Standard Book of Spells, Grade One, printed on that compulsive press. Studying, with an aim toward enhancing the effects for a better learning experience, even if that was only printing a few extra lines here or there for clarification.

Just because Gilderoy himself was incompetent, didn't mean he didn't know people who weren't highly skilled in their fields. Indeed, some of his tutors were very highly qualified individuals, and all of them could recommend good books. If this press could be used as Miss Granger thought it might, then they could print out sets of textbooks that a person could read in a week or two that would catapult them much further along the road to competency.

Gilderoy himself could use such a boost, and knew most of his fans could too.

Actually, there they had much potential advantage waiting around, as Frank and Alice Longbottom were co-conspirators in this little project, and as aurors had access to those training manuals.

Further, he didn't know how (and was determined never to ask), but Harry had somehow obtained a copy of the secret Death Eater training tome.

They had even told him some of the history, including the Dark Slytherin's original name. Back in the day Tom Riddle had been

forming the group that would eventually become the Death Eaters, he'd been able to train those in it personally. As the group grew that became impossible. Still, he needed those people to be deadly, and couldn't count on their ordinary education to provide the necessary skills. So he'd written up little leaflets and pamphlets holding the core of what he felt was required for his little cadre, and many of those he'd taught personally had added to it things that he'd instructed them on.

The later Death Eaters could afford to simply ride on the fear they caused, counting on that to render their prey helpless animals before them. But the first few, before they were even called Death Eaters, had to have a truly remarkable amount of skill in order to achieve that fear in the first place, and partially it was this training that gave them that edge. Only partially, because the first few followers of Tom Riddle had contained some already remarkably skilled individuals.

As successes piled on, Tom had soon lost interest in giving his followers extra training; and after their initial rush of victories new recruits were taught the Unforgivables as most of what they'd needed to know.

But those taught just to use the Unforgivables were nothing on those few who had been taught personally by the Dark Lord. Nor were they anything on those who'd read those leaflets authored by him. The core Death Eaters, all members of the Inner Circle, had always been members of those two groups, either those taught by the dark lord personally, or by reading his notes. So, the ambitious lot that they were, soon they were clambering for copies.

Gilderoy had no idea where little Harry had come across a complete set of Voldemort's training leaflets and the notes added to those by the few taught by him in person. And it frankly gave him the shivering willies that Voldemort himself seemed to have gone over this compiled copy, adding corrections and extra directions. But he was determined not to ask where it came from.

He didn't want to know.

Harry, or someone, had edited out all of the truly dark information, causing terror through atrocities, planning for rape and pillage, and so on. Lots of curses were simply too vile for ordinary folks to use. But the cleansed version, edited for the general population, was still a substantial tome equal, if different and slightly darker, to the auror training materials.

If any portion of that, or the auror training manuals, could be converted into compulsive reading format for ease of retention and comprehension, then they could easily shave off years from their proposed training program.

Frankly, Lockhart couldn't wait to get started.

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Bellatrix LeStrange was, in most ways, a very simple and elemental woman. In others, she was nuttier than a bag full of squirrels. But, at her heart, she still enjoyed very simple pleasures.

Reading the compiled tome of Dark Lore, penned in his own hand and edited by her master himself (and not that silly 'cleansed' version he'd passed off to the Lockhart fool) while lounging around her ancestral home triggered most of those.

For one, she was preparing to better serve her master. That was a bundle of pleasures all tied up in one right there. Increasing her skills for torturing and slaughtering his enemies was another not-small thrill. The atmosphere of the ancient Black family residence at Grimmauld Place was another comfort, and the Black Family library was one of the few repositories of Dark Lore that could teach her master anything on that topic that he didn't already know. Giving him access to those would please him; and that too, made her happy.

So, really, she had very few buttons that weren't already being pushed as far as her simple pleasures went.

Truly, there was no substitute to being by her master's side. But until they knew if Dumbledore had become aware of her Filch disguise, it was better to let the miserable squib do his own job for a time.

Until then, this was a distinctly satisfying second best.

For the moment, she was in charge of securing those filthy muggles who had abused her lord's present container. That would be the case until permanent quarters could be arranged for them, deep in the cold dark of some pit. To get them ready for this, she had secured them in her basement.

Her lord also appreciated imagination in his service. Since the object was to torture these filthy beasts (not just muggles, but now dark creatures - her lord had a flair for the artistic she desired to emulate), she'd taken the extra precaution of casting a Burning Skull curse on each of them.

A burning skull curse consumed the eyes, ears and tongue of a victim as well as damaging the outer tissues of the face, leaving one permanently blind, deaf and dumb and causing enormous pain without actually killing the victim. It left them in anguish, wallowing in helpless misery forever.

There was no question about it. It was a dark curse. It had no other function than to inflict misery, helplessness and suffering on those who got targeted by it. The spell could be put to no other purpose.

It also put fear into the hearts of one's enemies. Most Gryffindors could face death. But virtually anyone would quail over the prospect of being horribly mutilated, left disfigured and unable to speak, see or hear for the remainder of their normal lives.

It was a terror weapon, and Voldemort had used it on dozens of his foes. He let them live as examples to others; and it had gotten the message across, establishing him as a person to be feared.

Bellatrix had not only applied it to those three filthy muggles, she had put in their cage a single magical crystal eye - basic function only, no need to pamper them. But now those filthy creatures got something to fight over to fill their boring hours.

It kept them entertaining, tearing at each other like that.

To give them something to look at, and thus a reason to fight over the eye, she'd used polyjuice, and some of their original hairs, on rabbits that Bella then killed using the Avada Kedavra. Creatures that died under polyjuice retained their altered forms (something that made fooling muggle police into thinking the victims were dead childishly easy). She'd put the dead polyjuiced rabbits into display cages under preservation charms. The woman, at least, found endless reason to stare entranced at her pre-curse form, as a semi-release from her present ugliness brought about by the hag curse.

For the boys, there was an animated painting of some nude floozy they could watch. That seemed to entertain them enough to want to fight over the eye.

So, again, Bellatrix really had very few buttons that weren't already being pushed as far as simple pleasures went.

There were a trio of filthy muggles in the basement that she could torture whenever she was feeling catty, her master's book to read and memorize when she was bored, rooms for practicing her spells and other skills without the Ministry knowing, and a House Elf to keep the creature comforts coming.

Also, to surprise her Lord, she had decided to read this other book, one of the quasi-forbidden tomes restricted by the Ministry: on how to become an animagus. She'd almost achieved a transformation long ago. But then she and her cousin Sirius had a falling out, and she'd stopped practicing.

Now it was time to play catch-up.

She hoped to become a suitable pet, as that way she could accompany her lord to school. And who could guess a familiar could also be your bodyguard?

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The Weasley twins were having possibly the best year of their short lives.

They were already imaginative sorts, but there were limits to what you could do on a shoestring budget and with mostly handmade equipment. Until Harry, their best gear had been stolen out of rubbish bins and laboriously repaired.

Against the odds, the twins were actually Potions prodigies, among other things. Most of their pranks and special items came in the form of candies or other edible objects, although quite a few also came in the form of Charms, at which they were no less geniuses.

No, the surprising part of their being Potions geniuses was that they were Gryffindors and the subject was taught by Snape. The biggest reason for that was the duo had twigged onto the fact long ago that the Ministry didn't monitor potion brewing with anything like the same kind of intensity as they did wand magic, so it was something they could practice safely at home.

Frankly, they had been brewing potions before they'd turned eight, using some of Bill and Charlie's stuff, and whatever old things could be scrounged out of the attic. They had managed to learn a lot already, puzzled out on their own. In fact, they had a near encyclopedia of uses for ghoulish parts, as the one that lived in their attic had long been used as a source of materials.

Then Harry had gone and sent that Basics of Brewing book to Ron, who never used it, and the twins were unable to resist snatching it away in an instant to guzzle down the knowledge from.

The poor book was already dog-eared from overuse. It had opened up their minds to so many possibilities they hardly knew where to begin!

Then Harry had come through for them with all of that brand new furniture, including a Portable Potions Lab with advanced tools, and suddenly they had everything they'd need to conduct experiments on a large scale. Everything, that is, except a large source of potions ingredients.

Frustrating, but after their first raid on it, Snape was keeping an unusually tight hold on his private stock of ingredients this year; and the potion supply cupboard for students was likewise unusually well watched over. The thing was almost worth a major prank over, but Fred and George honestly had no idea how to outdo whoever was already pranking him!

I mean, dunking his head in a bucket of acid? How do you top that? They were sure they could find ways, and the challenge was intriguing, but of far more immediate concern was how to resolve their current supply difficulties. They had only so much money to spend in Hogsmead, buying stuff.

So, businessmen that they were, the twins had determined the only way this was going to work was to come out with salable products, some marketable items they could sell around the tower and turn a profit on, then cycle into more ingredients. Thanks to the secret passageways, they had access to the stores in Hogsmead any time they wanted.

Still, it counted in both their minds as a crime that most of their shiny new equipment was sitting idle, just for the lack of material to use.

Speaking of material for new potions, Harry had been giving the Weasley twins kneazle hair starting only a few days ago, and again every time he brushed his cat. So, like with the ghoul in their family's attic, they were conducting experiments with that, because it was what they had available.

It didn't stop them from hurting for more possibilities, though.

|||

"Is that it?" Papers were rustled.

"Yes, dear. I think it is." A soft yet concerned sigh of hope mingled with terror was heard, with a tiny note of relief hidden somewhere in there.

Ted and Miranda Granger looked at each other over the top of the box piled high with pamphlets, charts and tables.

"Do you think it will convince her?" Hermione's mother asked softly, worried beyond belief at the things her daughter had been forced to go through.

Ted took his desperately concerned wife in a hug, both still looking down at the box. "Well honey, we've got to hope for the best. There is the fact that our ever-logical little girl wouldn't have asked us for material on other magic schools if she wasn't at least willing to consider a switch. She's not a liar, either, and she said she wanted more data to base a decision off of. That's as close as she's ever come to considering it."

Miranda giggled into her husband's chest. "Only because Harry told her to. I swear, every letter is 'Harry this' or 'Harry that'. I'd be scared if I wasn't so grateful. First that he saved her life from that troll, and now with this being willing to consider transfer to a safer school matter. The first point she made in her letter was that he was willing to make a switch if she was. That may be all it took."

"It'll work out ok, hon." Ted gave his wife a reassuring squeeze, before he glanced up at Hedwig the owl, then scowled at the hefty box full of brochures on other magical institutes of learning. "Now our only problem is to figure out how we're going to mail this."

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Author's Notes:

Well, I spent most of this chapter playing catch-up on my loose ends, keeping some of the minor characters in play by having a bit of fun with them. Fudge and crowd were going to make an appearance, but I hit my self imposed limit on chapter size and went with that.

But getting Snape to torment Draco as revenge for his attempted murder of Luna was just so... satisfying to do! And ironic, and poetic justice, too.

Chapter Forty-Two by Lionheart

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And yes, here in chapter forty two you get the answers to life, the universe, and everything.

Or at least fairy magic.

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"Firenze?" Hermione raised her hand. "You pointed out one of the qualities of a dryad's bow was that they could adapt to the strength of a user. But then you pointed out that was very little use to someone who was already expert, and didn't have to be constantly replacing bows. Surely you are an expert. So why did it sound so important to you to get a dryad's bow?"

"There are several properties more than I just stated," the centaur dipped and tossed his head with one pawing hoof. "Any wooden bow must have gentle treatment and be protected from excessive damp or dryness. Also, the slightest chip or crack can render them not only useless, but dangerous to the one using them. Both these problems are less extreme for the living wood of a dryad's bow, which can self-repair. More than that I would prefer not to say."

Luna spoke for him, "Centaurs have been master archers from their earliest history, and have not always gotten along well with wizards. So spells for deflecting arrows have been around for a very long time, even made it into medallion form so they are always on." She lifted a charm locket out of her shirt and showed it off. It had a pair of broken arrows inscribed on the back.

Serenely, she replaced it under her shirt and went on explaining. "Those spells are potent enough to render archery all but useless against most wizards, so long as they are adequately prepared - which wizards fighting in wars against the centaurs always are."

Here Harry spoke up, adding the weight of some of Voldemort's experiences to Luna's observations, "Incidentally, those same spells work perfectly fine against bullets, better than against arrows, actually. They weren't designed that way. But through stroke of genius, practical necessity or sheer dumb luck, those arrow deflecting spells create a screen that resists material objects with force directly proportional to the object's velocity. So bullets, which depend on velocity for everything, are subsequently blocked better."

Tom Riddle knew this from personal experience. He'd grown up during World War Two when this had been a hot topic among mages, and later proved it himself in person. You slaughter enough muggles and sooner or later you run into one who tries to use a gun, illegal or not, against you.

High velocity bullets against those anti-arrow shields... you might as well be attacking the ocean with a bit of pocket fluff. It was pointless, absurdly so.

Hermione began nodding, suddenly seized by a thoughty stupor. "People are very impressed with modern guns but the energy delivered ranges from only about as much as a thrown baseball, to not terribly different than a bowling ball at release. The equation is very well known, energy equals one half mass times velocity squared, and while a bullet may go very fast it has negligible mass. The largest personal scale bullet I know of is the 12 gauge shotgun slug, which weighs in at about an ounce. For other bullets an ounce is just way too big to serve as a system of measurement, so they get measured in grains. The trick about bullets is all that energy is highly concentrated, instead of being spread out over a wide area, like a baseball. The Hollywood myth of people instantly dropping dead the moment a bullet wings them is as much movie magic as Mary Poppins is!"

"Who?" Luna blinked.

"Mary Poppins. She..." Hermione began to explain, but got cut off.

"Oh, I know who she is." Luna interrupted, serenely puzzled. "She was going to be my nanny, but she'd retired with her husband Bert

three years before I was born. I was just wondering how you knew her."

Hermione's jaw swung free as if unhinged for a moment.

The blonde girl continued calmly, as if she had not just shattered one of her friends childhood myths (proving that things she'd accepted as fake often DO exist. Really, she was living in a world of magic and centaurs. How much more naive about 'that can't possibly be real' could she be?), "No, one of the things that had to have interested our teacher here is something that most centaurs have been seeking for simply ages. Due to the magic properties inherent in a dryad's bow, they can be made to penetrate a wizard's arrow deflecting shield, whereas unenchanted equipment could not."

"It is not the only way," Firenze supplied politely. "There are more ways than petitioning dryads to get a magical bow. But we centaurs lack the spell ability to charm or transfigure parts to make them ourselves. Nor do we have the wealth to convince corrupt wizards to break their own laws to supply them for us. And the majority of us feel that consorting with evil to get them is too high a price to pay itself. Goblins would surely provide them, but we run into the same barricades of no wealth and incompatible morality with them."

"Do you seek war with wizard-kind?" Hermione asked, eyes round.

Firenze pranced an irritated circle before answering. "Just that we do not seek it does not always mean it does not come seeking us!" he declared. "In your Dark Arts there are several spells requiring the death of a centaur, or the harvesting of parts that requires our death. Your Ministry turns a well-bribed eye away from predations against us. That is why our population is so small, even in this last refuge."

Harry wisely kept his mouth shut about a centaur phallus being one of the more common ingredients associated with certain fertility rites very popular among purebloods.

Once again Firenze pawed a back hoof, staring at them haughtily. "Let that be another lesson for you, one always drilled into centaur youth: You do not have to seek a war for it to find you. If everyone

who wanted peace was left alone by those who didn't the world would have nothing in its history that we would recognize today. But it should be obvious to you that we do not live in such a world. We never have, nor will we. The nature of evil is such that it will always bring suffering and death where it can. Those who bring evil with them will always bring force to bear to compel compliance. When one is faced with them you may either choose to resist or become a willing victim. If you chose to resist, know that you will have to counter their force, and that will require some force of your own. Your strategy will dictate how much, but more is always welcome, and having less is not a virtue."

Allowing his students a moment to absorb the new material, the centaur nodded. "The capacity to fight should always be sought by those who desire peace."

After waiting another moment, the centaur pranced and continued. "So, for myself, a dryad is an ideal route for acquiring magical bows. And ultimately, for you as well. Indeed, for you this is far more important."

"Why is that?" Hermione asked.

"Didn't you know?" Firenze pranced aside in a gesture of surprise. "They fey have a profound impact on the world around them - and you are among the most potent of all fairy creatures. It is not just that fairy magic is hard to quantify. It may even be that their magic is more magic than other's magic."

On beholding their universal confusion regarding what was, to him, a profound statement, this caused the centaur to rear somewhat in irritation. "What do they teach you in that school?" he demanded.

"I would like to reply that they prepare us for life, but obviously they don't," Harry returned. "Could you explain more, please?"

The centaur took a deep breath to calm himself. Reading their faces, he said, "I perceive that I must start at the beginning. You are aware of how ordinary magic prevents some muggle technology from working?"

Three eager nods.

"Do you know how?"

Three shaken heads.

The centaur released a barking sigh, rearing and circling before he brought himself back under control. Seeing a number of upturned faces around him, Firenze explained. "Astronomy is not just the study of stars, although there are many that treat it as such. No, one does not get far in it without also being drawn into the study of mathematics, but also gravity and light. So it was with muggle science and the same with centaurs. We are aware of some muggle science, and can guess at the rest. Plus, we have overheard much. Quite a few of our young foals like to drink invisibility draughts and hang out at muggle schools. And one of the basic precepts is this: to learn about one thing, discover how it affects other things."

He noted three students listening attentively.

"Very well," the centaur continued. "One third of all matter is positive, one third is neutral, and one third is negative, existing on a level finer than the keenest senses can detect. Muggles have given names to these particles. They call them protons, neutrons and electrons. Muggles have discovered a technology whereby they employ electrons, stripped of their association with protons and neutrons. They call this science electricity, and it is the basis for a profound number of their tools."

Seeing their acceptance, the centaur dipped and tossed his head approvingly. "It is well known that muggle devices using electricity do not function inside of a magic field. What is not well known is why. Let me tell you. One of the unexplained side effects of a magic field renders it impossible for electrons to leave their association with protons and neutrons. Without free electrons, electricity cannot exist. Radiation, as the muggles term high energy particles separating from the rest of matter, also cannot exist near magic since the parts of matter cannot be separate from one another inside of a magic field.

For this reason nuclear weapons cannot function inside of a magical area, but that is a topic for another time."

Hermione had acquired a frown. She raised her hand. "I'm sorry. But how can that be? I know living organisms generate electricity along nerves, and..."

"Bio-electricity is a different form, and not changed," the centaur explained. "No one knows why. We centaurs are the only ones to study the matter, and we are few, nor are we wealthy. Indeed, for us it is only a side interest, one of limited importance, a hobby if you prefer. But we have learned two things: bio-electricity does exist in a magical environment, and normal electricity does not. Theories as to why are not well explored."

Firenze watched as the trio struggled a moment with this to various degrees before accepting it.

Seeing he had their undivided attention, he continued lecturing over his crossed arms. "Now we are drawn back to the precept: to learn about one thing, discover how it affects other things. Fairy magic may be more potent than anyone else's, although there is much debate about this. It may merely be that it obeys fewer rules, and is more uncontrolled. But the evidence is significant, in that: while a side effect of normal magic is to increase the forces holding the basic building blocks of matter together, it has been observed fairy magic makes a great many rules quite flexible. Much of that which is constant ceases to be so around fairies."

"So... time isn't the only thing that behaves oddly around the fey, but other rules as well?" Luna queried delicately.

Hermione blinked, pondering, "That would impact technology rather badly."

"Precisely!" The centaur snorted, rearing slightly. "And the many delicate adjustments and measurements they make are thrown off as a consequence. Living things appear to always be exceptions. But on that which is not alive, the same careful calibrations using the same tools to create one result, can easily produce an entirely different one

around a fairy. Fairy creatures do not appear to do this intentionally, nor are results consistent. A delicate and precise machine to produce ball bearings, for example, if placed near a fairy, not only could but would be producing balls that are square, round, triangular or oblong, ranging in size from a tiny speck to a golf ball, all on the same settings for an otherwise constant machine."

The centaur snorted, recrossing his arms. "Although wizards are completely ignorant of it, their slaughter of the fairies kicked off a muggle scientific boom. Previous to that, accurate measurements and reproducible results were all but impossible, as fairies were everywhere."

Hermione was nodding, with a somewhat awestruck yet frightened look. "And since science depends on accurate measurements and reproducible results, it would've been impossible in a world overrun by fairies!!"

Firenze nodded at her, congratulating her comprehension. "Yes. Until the swarms of fairies were destroyed, muggles depended on weapons on which a slight change did not matter. So your sword feels slightly heavier today, so what? Does your shield feel a fraction of an inch thicker or thinner? Well, it will even out in time, and in the meanwhile can still do its job properly."

"But now!" Hermione blurted, eyes wide in her eagerness of realization. "The standard muggle weapons today depend strongly on tolerances of tens of thousandths of an inch! Firearms are extremely precise and finicky weapons. The slightest variance of the mechanical parts... any change at all would render them completely unusable! If not dangerous! If your bullet or barrel was too tight, you'll get an explosion. If they got too loose, the gas would escape and bullet wouldn't go anywhere. Clips could fall out, the firing pin not reach the bullet today, the hammer be too wide to strike or a trigger so thin it breaks off. The weapon could jam for so many dozens of reasons..."

Firenze nodded soberly and spoke over crossed arms, "I am told that muggle chemists also have extremely precise mixtures, particularly for their weapons."

"Of COURSE!" Hermione began ranting, the subject drawing whole new scope to the problem. "Gunpowder is relied upon to burn at exact rates according to precise mixtures, and carefully measured in precise doses. The properties have been exhaustively studied until they know exactly what to do!"

"Yet around a fairy," the centaur interrupted. "Those properties are subject to change without notice. So a mixture relied upon to burn at a certain rate of speed might go slower or faster."

Hermione raised her head, realization leading to dawning horror. "So a mix of powder relied upon to produce a certain amount of force could be stronger or weaker, and you'd never know until you fired it. A weaker charge could get your gun jammed, as the bullet failed to move properly, and the gas-powered eject of used cartridges in most firearms would probably stick."

"But a much stronger explosion than calculated for could easily get the gun to blow up in your face," Harry reflected soberly. "They build those things to have tolerances based on the expected charge. Too much more than that and the explosion of your gun would be probable." He frowned for a moment in consideration. "Just like happened often in the early history of firearms - back when fairies were around."

"And the primer in those bullets, an exact chemical mixture calculated to go off under a certain amount of force, might explode under the jostling of your hand as you pick a gun up - or it might not go off at all, even when the firing pin strikes and is supposed to trigger it!" Hermione ranted. "Or go off late! Half an hour after you pulled the trigger, long after a battle was over, your gun might fire."

"Or the thin metal that pin is supposed to deform to create that pressure on the primer might decide that it is stronger today, and not bend at all." Harry supplied. "Or it might prove weaker, and puncture entirely, blasting part of the force of your gunpowder's explosion back where it isn't supposed to go. It's a small thing, but there are SO MANY parts of this that could fail!"

"And it wouldn't just be firearms," Hermione concluded sadly. "Car engines are another thing that depend upon precise tolerances. Those wouldn't work either, I'm afraid. Our technology depends upon so many exact measures of so many interconnected things that the slightest failure of those at all could lead to catastrophic failure of just about anything!"

"But archery," Luna intoned wisely, "Depends upon very simple principles, and uses uncomplicated mechanical forces subject to the fine control of a living creature, which can compensate for any irregularity. If not on the first shot, then on the third. A creature complicated enough to stand on a bit of wood and surf a wave could adapt to minor changes in archery equipment as they occurred."

All eyes turned soberly to the centaur.

"It is my regret to inform you," Firenze spoke seriously, arms still folded across his massive chest, "That any connection you had to the muggle world was most probably severed when you became fey creatures. Any tools you were fond of, from telephones to computers, automobiles or airplanes, and of course their weapons, would no longer function either for or around you. Wizards create a magic field only when using magic. But fairies create one at all times. You cannot turn it on or off. If you wish to fight, muggle tools are not an option. What seems simple could well not be. If you pull the pin on a grenade, the timing fuse, which depends on precise chemical reactions which have been laboriously clocked at exact rates, could well go off in your hand - or not go off at all. Do not forget, even Time, that great constant, is a variable among the fey. All lesser rules more so."

"But the Weasleys got their car to work around Harry!" Hermione exclaimed.

"That was back when he was simply a wizard." Firenze corrected. "Mages cannot use electricity. It does not exist around them. But they have, for some time, been exploring options: spells and charms to create equivalent tools and effects. It is not the same. It could never be the same. But they are, at times, able to produce equal results - though the particulars may be quite different. I have seen this car you speak of and it behaves more like an animal than a device. If it still

required the things it did when it was purely a machine it would have stopped functioning long ago."

"That's right," Harry mumbled to himself, allowing Hermione and the others to overhear because there was nothing particularly private in his musing. "It's only been running on the same tank of petrol for about a year now."

Firenze stamped a hoof. "That is correct. It no longer runs on mechanical principles because it is no longer purely a machine. But that is after vigorous magical renovation. Because both the technological basis and the spells that modifies it are unpredictable around the fey, such a device would be useless to you. Also, the more powerful the fairy magic, the stronger the changes. As you are among the most powerful of fairy creatures, technology is at its most unpredictable around you."

"Then why isn't everything malfunctioning around us all of the time?" the bushy haired one questioned.

Luna pierced her with a steady gaze. "Because we live at Hogwarts."

"Luna is right," the centaur told them in commanding tones. "Allow me to explain. Life and magic may be the only pure constants unaffected by fairy magic. Things closer to life are more resistant to change. So, a blacksmith hammered sword, made purely by hand, would vary very little, even in the strongest of fairy auras. But muggle devices are made by machines, which in turn were made by other machines, using resources mined by machine and designed on more machines, and so on. It was once my privilege to see a group armed with muggle rifles enter the forbidden forest; muggleborns after easy kills on the rare creatures found there. But when they passed a fairy nest their devices nearly ceased to exist. One turned into a simple wooden stick, like a branch freshly plucked from a tree. The barrel of another became as flexible as rope, and eventually slithered off. Other reactions were no less extreme."

"So handmade devices are more durable against the changes wrought by fairy magic, and virtually everything at Hogwarts, or in the rest of magical society, is handmade. I see." Hermione began

blinking. "I know muggle smiths anciently would recite prayers over forges as they worked. Does that help?"

"It would," the centaur answered. "But more importantly, the stronger the connection to life force something has, the less fairy magic changes it. So an item made of wood and leather would resist far stronger than one made of metal. Magic also hampers the change, an item handcrafted by a wizard is better than one made by a muggle. One created from parts of magical plants and creatures may well be constant. So magic devices are generally safe, to a degree. I still would not advise anything requiring tolerances to within thousandths of an inch," Firenze cautioned wisely.

"Why hasn't our film projector broken down, then?"

"Uhm," all eyes turned to Harry, who blushed. "Well, in the first place we don't spend too much time around that equipment, just setting it up and taking it down when it has to be moved between rooms, and most of the time it just stays set up in the History of Magic class."

"And?" Hermione delved, being able to tell there was more.

"Do you know my dog?" Harry looked up, meeting all their eyes with a poker face. They nodded. He inhaled deeply. "The film projector ate Spaz. I've found it wandering the halls at night on those metal tripod legs, hunting other pets. It scared me."

Firenze swished his tail, satisfied. "The affect of fairies on technology does not have to be obvious, instant or immediate (though it can be all of those things) and it certainly is not universal. It obeys very few rules, and changes can be good as well as bad. Yet it tends to accumulate the longer you stay in an area. Still, at your level of fairy power, if you were to stay the night at a muggle house, it would most likely be quirky until the day it got torn down, no matter the amount or extent of repairs done to correct its foibles."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "So," he postulated. "We could cut a swath of destruction simply by walking down streets in muggle London?"

"Possibly," the centaur agreed. "Again, do not forget every aspect of this is variable to a very great degree. You might do no harm at all, or none that would be evident. However, if you were to take up residence there, the area around your home would almost certainly be rendered uninhabitable to muggles, who rely on devices that would break almost constantly. Ask me for specifics?" the centaur shrugged, splaying his hands helplessly. "I have none to give you. By its very nature, the subject cannot be exhaustively studied, as there appear to be almost no rules, nor can any measuring device be termed 'constant' in their presence. Again, there are very few who even try to understand the phenomena, and I have told you as much as is known."

"So, to archery?" Luna bounced eagerly, having already known much of the effect of fairy magic, and not having the close, personal connection to muggle technology as the other two, who were losing something by no longer being able to rely on it.

"Ah, yes," the centaur smiled, reaching for and stringing one of the practice weapons. "Another reason you should be grateful to your dryad friend is this: handmade wooden archery equipment changes very little around you, so it is an excellent martial discipline for you to practice. However, a dryad's bow changes not at all, being part of a living thing, and thus you will be more accurate with her gifts of gear than with any other."

"There is also the fact they can be used to penetrate anti-arrow shields," Luna smirked with a quirky grin.

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Centaurs were prized as instructors for a reason.

Nobody sought to learn their teaching methods. No one was all that hot on the idea of being trained by someone who'd been taught by a centaur (it was just like being taught by any other expert.) There was no great urge to get their devices or tools for training. They wanted the centaurs themselves to be their teachers.

The reason for that was very simple.

As Luna had pointed out, humans were made up of a great many things, but magical creatures tended to possess a very narrow focus. It was almost as though everything magical had been created for a reason, and sought to fill that purpose. Most had special abilities to help them do so.

Centaur's were focused on the pride of personal ability, and to get there they had a gift for teaching.

It was a simple yet profound thing. There was no great, showy display or jaw dropping moments. They simply had a knack for perceiving a problem in a person's development, understanding how to fix it, and conveying that data in a fashion usable by the student.

While it may sound simple, all important things are simple, and simple things are often hard. Their being able to do this effectively meant there was no wasted time or effort under their tutelage. All of the work you put into learning achieved the best possible results for your time and energy.

It has been often said there was no such things as a bad student, only bad teachers. While not perfectly true, it was accurate in by far the majority of cases. And on their subjects of expertise, centaurs were near perfect teachers. On that one day on instruction, the trio learned more than they would've in six months of an average college elective on archery, which is not to say they were good, or even adequate, but they'd made for a passable start. For now they were left with physical limits as their main liability (and the need to reinforce and refine their newfound knowledge).

That led to their mention of the fact of how they were so dissatisfied with their own physical training regime, and it seemed natural in the course of conversation for the centaur to take over supervising that.

Then it was time to see if those supplements would assist them in building up body conditioning while working out with a centaur.

Author's Notes:

I'm tired of anonymous jerk-offs telling me 'bows suck, guns are better.' That may even be true, but it's not what I want to do with my story. So I slapped down some rules to make it physically impossible for my heroes to use them. Just because I'm tired of listening to the blind 'the way we do things now is the only true and perfect way to do ANYTHING' crowd.

I want a fantasy story, not Rambo, the Fairy Blood.

Say what you want about them, there isn't a handgun or personal scale firearm in the world that packs as much energy as a 25lb cannonball going 80mph - and wizards use those on themselves in a SPORT for FUN!!

Also, forgive me, but I get annoyed by the 'Oh, EMP shielding will make muggle items work in magic areas' crowd. For one thing, EMP stands for Electro-magnetic Pulse, and if you wrap a couple of copper wires around an iron bar and apply current, what you get is electromagnetism, NOT magic!

There is no sense, sanity or reason to suppose the one behaves like the other. You might as well say that "Oh, I made my watch waterproof. Now it will function in magic zones." If the one behaved at all like the other, muggles would have detected magic and developed tools for experimenting with it just like we did electricity or any other thing. People in general believed in magic FAR before they'd ever HEARD of electricity!!

And wizards are too out of touch to have stopped them all. Indeed, there would have been no need for secrecy at all if we could've employed magic just like we do electricity, or magnetism. Some people could've used it directly (wizards) others through light switches and batteries. No need for conflict. Use those wizards like we do electricians and everybody in the world would've been using magical all the time for everything.

And while that would've made an interesting story, it's not the Harry Potter universe.

Chapter Forty-Three

by Lionheart

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Anyone asking questions regarding the KFC of combo harvester didn't read my last chapter. Here, I'll quote for you: "The affect of fairies on technology does not have to be obvious, instant or immediate (though it can be all of those things) and it certainly is not universal."

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Hogwarts castle was truly ancient. Similar muggle structures were all fairly young, by comparison. Most of the truly ancient ones had been destroyed by lightning blasting them apart and burning them down through the ages. It was a real problem back before Benjamin Franklin invented the lightning rod in the 18th Century. Countless old castles were simply ruins, scattered stones tossed about like bombs because of powerful lightning strikes during storms.

But lightning never struck Hogwarts. The wizards didn't know why, they'd just never had that problem. And, after all, the attitude of "any problem I can safely ignore is not a problem" had been prevalent for a long time - and not just among wizards.

While they reentered this ancient edifice, two barely recognizable furry blurs raced passed the children at maximum velocity.

The kids could not help themselves and glanced back the way they'd come, wondering if a film projector was chasing them.

"I could almost convince myself one of those two cats was McGonagall," Hermione spoke with an odd lilt to her voice, unable to shake the strangeness of the moment.

"C'mon," Harry grabbed her arm and kindly towed her along. "We'll be late for Divination class."

This further strangeness did not help Hermione in the slightest. "I find it so odd that we're still having that class, in spite of the teacher going missing."

Harry shrugged. Hermione/Trelawney had managed to impress quite a large number of the students. Strangely, most students who'd had her class this year were already missing her.

However, Hermione for one was unsurprised that most of those students had taken great care to get their Divination homework done on time and properly, taking it for granted the teacher would know in spite of her absence, and somehow sure their grades would be marked appropriately.

What neither child knew was that Fred and George had seen Trelawney nip off into the forest and not come back. So those two were playing pranks on the school by skipping up to her tower every morning to write assignments on the board - with the ultimate challenge that whoever found their teacher got a free 'O' for the year.

Dumbledore knew those two Weasleys were doing this, but frankly couldn't spare the time from his other emergencies to deal with the matter himself; so he was quite happy to let their pranks continue for a time, as it concealed an issue he'd otherwise have to take time out to correct personally.

He just didn't have the time to find or hire a new Divination teacher at this moment. And worse yet, finding one who could fill both Trelawney's shoes as a true oracle yet incompetent teacher would be all but impossible.

At the moment, he didn't even have the time to try. So, Fred and George were getting away with a massive prank on the entire school.

Frankly, Hermione fought a near-constant temptation to just turn back into Trelawney's old form again and take up teaching that class once more, she'd enjoyed it so much. And it seemed only fair, the new Sybil Trelawney was still using Hermione's old face and form. Only the sure knowledge the Headmaster would confront her over her

return, and ask questions she didn't want to answer, or possibly do worse things, stopped her from trying.

She'd really liked teaching that class.

|||

"Hermione, what are you doing?"

The girl started guiltily, then looked up sheepishly. "Grading everyone's Divination homework?"

"Uh huh," Harry looked over the sheaves of paper surrounding her, from all Houses and all years. "And why is it that on each assignment you have put comments on their NEXT piece of homework? The ones we haven't written yet? Actually, there's stuff here on our behavior in classes - and I KNOW you weren't in some of those to see what you're commenting about."

Hermione drooped visibly, dropping the assignment she'd been making notes on. "Because it won't leave me alone. Their work keeps swimming in my head, and unless I tell them about it the things I need to tell them won't stop being there, trying to get out. Like this fifth year Ravenclaw - this assignment is alright, but unless he does the next one quickly he'll get a bad cold and won't be able to get it in on time. Or, over here, the seventh year Hufflepuff girls, they're ALL wrong about palmistry! I know we don't cover those lines until next week, but unless I tell them now one of them is going to get in a dating relationship with a boy who's all wrong for her! And I know we weren't there, but I've still got to scold the fourth-year Slytherins for their abominable behavior their last Divination class session. They really had no call to say those things - and I KNOW I shouldn't know what they said, to whom, or why!"

The bushy haired girl looked up at Harry in distress. "It's all there, in my head! I can't tell you how it got there, but now it won't leave me alone! And I've got to do things like scold poor Neville for spilling ink over his next paper - the one he hasn't written yet! Although, I feel less guilty about telling Nott that he and his cronies are all going to

die during the next war, so he ought to be less enthusiastic about it coming, because he loses."

Harry blinked several times.

"Oh. Carry on, then."

|||

"Well, truly, it's obvious Hermione is a Homework Seer," Luna commented as they all got together on the castle lawn to grade History of Magic homework.

Myrtle, who was hovering around, giggled before darting back to the castle.

"Second Sight manifests in unpredictable ways," Luna went on lecturing just as though she hadn't been mocked or interrupted. "We all have it. She is just the first to learn how to use it in any fashion."

The other two stared at her.

"Oh, don't go looking at me like that." Luna would not be ruffled. "It's easy to know too much about the future. Hermione actually has one of the most useful forms of it: helping people to learn. Really, I can't think of a more useful one."

Desperately unwilling to face that subject as yet, Hermione hefted her books more closely to her chest (and yes, she had an enchanted bookbag given to her by Harry, but honestly, it was... okay, she simply felt safer with a good, thick tome between her and the rest of the world. It's a defense mechanism, but one that worked well for her) before laying them out and, checking to see if they were alone, turned to her best friend, who was currently fingering a hole where he was missing a tooth. "Harry, why are you so concerned with the way your muggle form works? I mean, you are exercising to get it in shape when your real body is already quite fit. Now this whole tooth decay thing. You really have perfect teeth. It's your human disguise that doesn't!"

The boy pulled his finger out of his mouth, ceasing its explorations, and gave her his best answer. "It's not like that. It's... hard to describe, Hermione. But think of it like an old and favorite suit of clothes. Just because you have great workout gear or a really neat swimsuit or excellent casual dress doesn't mean you don't have to put on the old business suit from time to time, and you care that it has grown worn in the knees or it's getting scuffs on the jacket. You want it to look nice, because sometimes you still have to wear it."

Hermione's eyes glittered, and she kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks, Harry. I couldn't think of a more perfect way to explain it to a girl. Yes, of course you'd want it to look nice."

"How did you come to be missing teeth?" Luna was honestly puzzled.

Harry shrugged. "Blame the Dursleys. Not only did I get a few knocked out of me by my 'kind relatives' in various beatings, but they also took pride in having never spent a penny on me. So naturally I've never seen a dentist."

"Well, you've SEEN one." Hermione giggled. "Technically you've seen two - when my parents left me at King's Cross. But I'll admit that's different than seeing one in a professional capacity."

Luna turned to direct a puzzled look on her. "Why are you taking this so casually?"

The bushy haired girl bounced a carefree shrug. "I guess because it doesn't matter. I mean, we all know he really has perfect teeth under that disguise. Besides, I'm sure there must be some magical way of restoring them. Right, Harry?"

"No, there isn't," Luna interjected sharply. "I'm amazed you didn't know that, actually. Haven't you seen the toothless hags loitering around the Leaky Cauldron or Knockturn Alley? For that matter, Tom the barkeep doesn't have a full set himself. Don't you think they'd fix that if they could?"

That was enough to bring Hermione to a full stop. "What?!? But..! I KNOW wizards regrow bones with ease! And they're almost the same thing."

"And boys are almost the same as girls," Luna provided calmly. "But 'almost' provides room for a world of difference in the fine details. You could also say with some accuracy that boys and girls are nothing alike - and the same would be just as true of teeth and bones."

"Well, they're made out of the same thing..." Hermione began.

"...with only minor differences," Luna finished for her, then blinked innocent wide eyes at her. "Were you talking of boys and girls or teeth and bones?"

That was enough to bring Hermione to a jarring stop.

Harry gave an unusually sober shrug. "Recall that I've only just begun to study medicine, and didn't inherit any from before, but generally speaking wizardkind can only supercharge the body's own ability to repair itself. Skin, blood and bone can all be replaced by a body naturally. The potions and spells we use just speed that up. It can't do something like replace a lost limb, because a body has no ability to do that naturally. Likewise, if the healing ability of one's body is lost due to age or illness, they are helpless. Magical understanding of infectious, genetic or mental diseases is late Medieval at best. And since human teeth do not regenerate... once lost they are gone."

"And a wise person takes care not to lose anything they cannot replace," Luna scolded primly, an effect somewhat marred by the fact her eyes were crossed, looking over one of their shoulders.

Somehow both other youths caught the message. 'A secret once lost cannot be reclaimed' and decided to put off talking of fairies or secrets for now.

Still, Hermione had a bur in her mind from the most recent topic of conversation and it worried her, she she in turn gnawed it back. "We do, you know," she declared some moments later.

"What?" both of her friends looked up at her.

"We do, replace our teeth, I mean," the bookworm shoved an errant lock of hair out of her face, gaze still down as she pondered in heavy thought. "As children we get a set of baby teeth. Then, as we grow, those are no longer the right size for our much larger bodies, and they fall out and are replaced by a set of permanent teeth."

"Yes," Harry acquiesced. "But they call them permanent for a reason. We don't get another."

"Actually we do," Hermione corrected. "Wisdom teeth at age eighteen or thereabouts. Another complete set of four molars at the back of the jaw, so called because you're supposed to have acquired a spot of wisdom by the time they grow in."

"Still, four teeth is not a mouthful," Harry rubbed where he was missing some.

By now Hermione was sparkling as she looked up at them. "But it could be, don't you see? Harry, you just told me yourself how magic healing focuses on supercharging what the body can already do. We can regrow bits of bone, yes, but replace entirely missing ones? Not hardly. Not naturally. That's one area where magic helps a body go farther and do more than it could on its own. And, frankly, the fields have got to be related. Boys and girls are different, yes, but not so different that what kills one won't hurt the other. Besides, since a body ALREADY replaces it's entire mouthful of teeth once, why not magically trigger that over again? Then use magic to speed it up?"

Both her companions could see the light shining in her eyes as she declared this. They looked at each other.

"There are already examples of critters that replace teeth regularly. Sharks are one such, although there are others. Those could prove to be a source of ingredients. It's worth experimenting on," Luna conceded.

"For that matter, she's right," Harry allowed, "humans replace their teeth once during their lives, going from baby teeth to our adult sets. So, if we can just trigger that reaction over again..."

"You'd get a brand new set of cavity-less choppers!" Hermione overrode him excitedly to finish for him. "Which is not a bad thing," she mumbled, "as the mercury used in standard fillings has been proven to cause all sorts of health problems."

Harry pondered, scratching his chin. "If this could be made anywhere near as good as skele-grow you could replace your whole set overnight."

"Probably also modified to enhance evenness and brightness!" Hermione exclaimed, happy as a girl could get (without romance, which a talk about dentistry does not usually have).

"Plus, there's the monetary aspect," Harry added quietly, so only they could hear. "If we come up with a potion to replace bad teeth, people would buy it. So if we market our magic tooth cure to the magical public we'd make a small mint. And, as you know, money is power; and on the scale of politicking, or even fighting, we plan to do you can never have enough of it. More gold means more medicine, more weapons, and more food. In short, more ability to win a war. And the extra fame could hardly hurt any when it comes to future clashes with... certain old men."

"It would be as large an item as those magical plant pots," Luna agreed with a strange, far-off look to her eyes. "Possibly more, as it has more of a potential market. Not everyone raises plants, but we all have teeth - or wish we did. And the 'elegant' set would probably buy this to enhance looks if they had even minor problems to correct. Provided it worked, we'd have worldwide appeal, and probably have to hire the work to make them out."

Hermione frowned. "Which would lead to the secret for how to make it getting out, so we'd have knock-offs appearing."

"That would happen eventually in any case," Luna agreed. "We don't have the political clout to force through a monopoly such as this."

Even if we did, it is vanishingly unlikely such a monopoly would extend beyond England. And what if it did? Potion monopolies are always on a single recipe. All it would take are some minor modifications for there to be fairly cheap imitations."

Harry smiled darkly through his scowl. "There are families in Britain that do that for a living, switching out a few ingredients on established potions to market their own versions. And due to national pride people here would rather use the 'home grown' recipes than ones invented by foreigners. But due to the fact those families favor cheap substitutes to save on cost... it's given us the most foul tasting concoctions in the world. 'Tastes like a British potion' is a nasty epithet in most of the world."

"One frequently used in insults and other foul language," Luna agreed.

Harry was thinking. "Also, there's more to consider than just human teeth. There are uses for monster teeth of every kind. I can't tell you what a temptation it has been to just snag a few out of a dragon's maw from time to time - and they're already missing a few from before I got them. If we could pull the ones we need, then regrow them complete sets too..."

Luna was nodding. "Supply of certain valuable potion ingredients could expand explosively." Then she looked directly behind the other two. "Oh! Professor Myrtle, where have you been? We've all been waiting for you."

Hermione had been blinking furiously. She leaned closer to Harry and whispered, "so, not all potions taste nasty?"

Harry chuckled, then leaned closer to whisper back. "Not in the least. In fact the French go the opposite ways that we do. Just about every country has somebody who modifies potions to break patents or monopolies. Ours make the foul tasting concoctions you're familiar with, while the French take pride in their culinary skills and make some of the best flavored ones around."

"Good," the girl declared, resuming an upright stance in her seat as the ghost flittered in, directing the House Elves that had accompanied

it to set up chairs and tables for them to work on the stacks of homework she also had them deliver. "What was the assignment again?"

"Three feet of parchment on how The Lord of the Rings shaped the modern magical world we live in," Luna answered promptly.

"Hmm," Hermione started blinking at the stack of homework set before her, reading the top line, "Ring Wraiths were the obvious progenitors of the dementors of modern day? I guess I'd never given it much thought." A strange sort of clarity descended over the girl, and she bent down quickly to write. "An O+ concept, but for the grammar I have to make it an EE."

Both other young teens got scared looks on their faces as the girl descended on the clouds of homework, "Most hobbits are cowards, obsessed with food and other comforts... never having won a war, but being excellent cooks, they are the obvious ancestors of the French? Hmm."

The girl marked down a grade, sharply and decisively, and Harry had an odd feeling of wishing he knew what grade it was.

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Author's Notes:

You know, it's amazing to me just how big a proportion of my reviews boil down to "Kindly do not attempt to cloud my entertainment with facts."

I LOVE facts! I love learning things! I love understanding how different things affect or shape the world we live in, or those worlds that went before ours. To me this IS entertainment!

And, frankly, I am convinced without my need to understand things I would not be half the author I am today, as there just wouldn't be the depth of details to make a fully fleshed out story.

You've all read the "OMG!! [Hero] gets ultimate power dropped on him and pwns everyone, the end!" stories out there.

In Harry Potter fiction most of those fall along the lines of, "Wow! All Harry had to do was join the super-elitist House of racist snobs whose head once contracted with Voldemort to kill him, and everything instantly became fine as those murderous bastards instantly developed hearts of gold and treated the poor orphan boy who'd always been treated like a slave as their king!"

Don't Tell ME that what Snape did - telling old Voldy to kill the father and the child, just deliver the mother to him, wasn't EXACTLY that! He contracted out a hit that SUCCEEDED in killing James, was INTENDED to kill Harry, and his payment in return was to have been Lily - until she made herself inconvenient and so Voldy broke the deal, killing her instead of delivering her live to Snape.

Some good guy THAT turned out to be! "Yes, I loved your mother so much that I told Voldemort to kill you and your father so I could have her."

Really romantic guy, isn't he? Guess all you girls out there are just DYING to have a guy like that crush on you, aren't you?

To me, putting a shy and meek boy among the magical world's Nazis sounds like throwing a slab of fresh meat before ravenous wolves.

The insanity I can't explain is that, according to common fan perceptions, Slytherin is the house for the kind and understanding, selfless, self-sacrificing, insightful and caring.

Have none of them ever READ the books?!?!?

None of the Slytherins we see depicted in the actual source material are people I'd want sleeping in the same dorm with a knife in their potions kit! I'd be worried about being stabbed or smothered in my sleep!

Also, the 'poor Harry would be happy in Slytherin' cliché has one glaring flaw I've never seen anyone exploit yet - rich snobs in ANY

society are hard on those who aren't as rich as they! Plain Hogwarts robes aren't going to do it!

Why do you think Draco was already being fitted for robes when Harry arrived? Then STILL there being fitted after Harry got his robes and left?

It's called 'getting special treatment' people, and it happens when you spend more, getting higher than the normal quality and an obscene price tag.

Hanging around rich snobs, who we SEE rule that House in the books, then failing to dress right, act right, eat at all the right places (and 'right' in all cases being more accurately described as 'expensive') would be the most miserable place possible for a boy who doesn't have money to throw around!

In that situation you have only two options: be a pariah, abused by all around you, or become a suck up and become someone's toady. Human nature permits no other alternatives!

That Is The Way People Act! Have none of you even met snobs at school? Did you all grow up in some alternate universe where there were no cliques that did not welcome you with open arms?

Why do you crave acceptance from those who are most famous for rejecting everyone else out of hand for not being as good as they are? The children of people who are famous for KILLING people over the 'you CAN NEVER be as good as me, so therefore you must DIE' creed? Children who LOUDLY trumpet those SAME BELIEFS! And make NO SECRET they adhere to them?

Do you really want to hang out with all those bullies who sneered at you at school?

So all those 'Harry's parent's don't love him because they think it was his twin who saved them' plotlines, where our hero is as badly neglected by his own parents as the Dursleys, would NOT find all of his problems solved by being Slytherin! They'd become infinitely worse!

Some of these plots... it amazes me to think... No, I can't even picture HOW the people who wrote them had even MET other people at any point in their LIVES!! Their only rationality for the "Yes, my daddy kills people for not being as good as us, and I'm going to carry on that aspect of family business" crowd accepting and nurturing a little lost lamb who has nowhere else to go without a thought for personal gain or reward, seems to be wishful thinking.

No, I can only rejoice that MY stories, at least, contain a few facts.

Chapter Forty-Four by Lionheart

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After 'Normal Day' came 'Resource Day', the day for building up abilities and marshaling resources for dealing with the future conflicts.

Mostly, they'd intended this for the very simple reason of they needed to be stronger. So they'd decided to spend this extra time on developing personal skills, expanding that most critical of all resources - themselves.

However, today was turning out a little differently.

Mostly because they'd all been bombarded at the end of the 'Normal Day' before this by a recitation of all the various ways the world they lived in resembled some books by Tolkien. And one of those suggestions that had nothing to do with Hobbits, the French, or dementors, was that the dwarves of the modern wizarding world were the dispossessed descendants of those ancient, famous rulers of mountain halls.

And, well, that had struck an awfully familiar chord in everybody (and the first paper to suggest that got an O+ by Hermione).

They knew that dwarves existed. Lockhart had used them to deliver singing Valentines the previous year, a degrading job that had everyone involved most desperately embarrassed.

They also knew that the dwarves of their world had once enjoyed greatness. They'd been the fallback plan for cleansing the Cauldron of Blood simply because it was a known fact that dwarves were that good, they COULD cleanse an ancient artifact of that level of power of a taint so deep. They had, after all, made it in the first place.

But you don't give someone a humiliating job doing something degrading like delivering valentines nobody wants if he's got some dignity, or anything else he could do - something like, oh, say, making or repairing magical artifacts, or tending his mountain halls.

So the simple fact was the dwarves of the magical world were a fallen race. Where once they had enjoyed greatness, now they were the dispossessed, the dregs, huddling in those corners no one else wanted.

To Harry that simply screamed 'Opportunity'!

It was a formula that had been pulled countless times before, by just about every leader of their world: find some downtrodden group to champion to get yourself instant followers.

Vulturewart had done this for dark creatures like dementors, vampires and hags. Dumbledore had set wizard against wizard, then made himself indispensable to both sides of the conflict he himself had created.

No sooner had they finished grading the school's History homework than Harry was already resolved to see if he couldn't court some support among the dwarves, and was already halfway done with some plans for doing so.

One reason no one else had done this was the dwarven race was both proud and stubborn. Too stubborn to accept charity, and too proud to let themselves be treated as the underclass they had effectively become. So anyone looking for eager sycophants or bootlickers was more likely than not to simply walk away with the imprint of a boot low on his backside.

Dwarves did not toady.

That was fine for Harry. He wouldn't have wanted toadies anyway. That was what vulturewart and Dumbles wanted, and they'd pretty much sewn up the available supplies between them. Besides, look where it got them. Both had to be constantly checking their backs, and wary lest another man step in with a bribe to steal their followers away from them. Tom Riddle was not a hero to the vampires. He was simply a man offering them something they wanted. If someone came along offering something they wanted more, the night clans would be out of his service faster than he could say, "Who farted?"

No. Recruit sycophants and you got what you paid for. Mercenaries, the lot of them.

Dwarves, on the other hand... well, they were famous for recalling grudges forever. But they also never forgot any of their friends. Do a favor for them and it got repaid, even if they had to bathe a kingdom in blood to do it.

Of course, that grudge thing... you don't get away with betraying a dwarf. Ever. So for those for whom sneaky and underhanded dealing was a way of life, they were just too volatile to consider using for their ends. Better to take on championing those races who expected to be betrayed. It was safer.

Harry, who had no intention of betraying anybody if he could avoid it, simply checked into Sweden.

They had low population density and about eighty five percent of their people lived in urban areas. That made them easy to avoid for someone who wanted to set up secret magical preserves in the hinterlands. Not to mention it was a mountainous, rugged country and some of those out of the way places were so hard to get to they were probably among the most isolated spots on Earth. Not impossible to get to, but unlike the Himalayas, people rarely tried.

"I backpacked through the wilds of Sweden" just doesn't have the same ring as "I climbing Everest again this year." Although, objectively speaking, the only thing that could make climbing Everest any more tacky these days was if they installed an escalator to the top and put a Starbucks on the summit. Everest climbers were literally stumbling over piles of each other's trash as they went up and down.

That meant there were plenty of blind spots in the mountains of Sweden to include something secret. Say, even something magical.

There were plenty of mines in Sweden. But nothing that could be mined there couldn't be mined elsewhere, and usually cheaper. But

that was the same for all of the developed countries, and the usual games got played there to keep the domestic production going.

But one inevitable fact of mining was that Mines Run Out. There's only so much metal in them thar hills and sooner or later one particular pit doesn't pull enough of whatever out to pay for the costs of getting it. So they stop paying it and close the mine.

However, 'worth it' has a different meaning to corporate execs who have to balance labor and shipping costs, machinery breakdowns and social welfare benefits, than it does to, say, dwarves, who'd like to live there and use the ore themselves for their own purposes.

So, Harry bought himself a played out mine.

He had several of those already, through the Black family holdings. But those were in England, and the boy's whole objective lately was to get his resources moved out of that country, as it Dumbledore's prime zone of control.

Besides, it felt nice to do, as dwarves were a very Scandinavian race, and Sweden was one of their ancient homes. It would be a good spot for them to have a new home. They could turn the mine into a mountain hall themselves, and, in fact, would prefer to do so. Other people couldn't get it right.

Also, land was the ultimate source of wealth. Having land, like a played out mine, skills and the willingness to build, could put the dwarven race on the road to recovery.

By going through muggle channels he was able to use muggle currency, which even if he went his fastest at it and did nothing else, he couldn't conjure it as fast as the actual banks and governments were doing. So no harm done.

As iron was one of three principle portions of the Swedish resource base, the country had a lot of played out mines to choose from. So it wasn't any particular problem to get one in a nice, remote area.

Then he offered a deal to the dwarves. "This mine is worth X. Since I want to hire you for a building project, how about I trade you this mine for X amount of materials and labor?"

Then, when it turned out they had no materials to trade (their race had gotten THAT poor), that became, "Well, how about X amount of labor divided among harvesting the resources I need from my other properties and assembling those into the final product I desire?"

The final product?

Simple. He was making a town, and wanted the dwarves to build the houses at Godric's Hollow.

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When building a town it helps to know what you want to build.

Harry wanted Godric's Hollow to be safe. And, building it up from the ground in most cases, he had opportunities to do so like no one else had had in ages. Also having the skills of a renowned curse breaker turned home invader gave him knowledge like few others. In particular, it helped him understand the many mistakes most wizards made so he could avoid them.

In the first place, wizards, when they dealt with security at all, took to it as an afterthought. Defensive wards, where they existed at all, were applied to whatever ramshackle huts they were living in at the time.

The Weasleys were an extreme yet very good example of this. That house of theirs barely held together at all. It was a crazy structure that couldn't exist without magic supports, and you could put only so many wards on a house. So spending some of your precious allowance of that potential on structural wards holding up walls too crazy to exist without magic meant you had that much less capacity to spend on defensive wards for making yourself and your family safe from things like Death Eater attacks.

So, if you should take the remarkable step of actually building a structure that could stand up on its own without help, you didn't have

to weaken your capacity for defensive wards for that house to simply exist.

A remarkable thought, no? You wouldn't think so, but most wizards were so batty they verged on completely insane. To them this would be a completely revolutionary concept.

Of course, with magic you didn't often have to think ahead. If a dress did not fit because you'd gained FIVE DOZEN sizes since last wearing it, it could still be made to expand with charms, and it's out on the town with you. Left your wallet at home? Apparate back to get it in a second. Forgot to close the barn gate and the cow got out? Summon it. Not enough plates at the dinner table for all the guests you invited? Conjure more. Broke something foolishly? One quick Reparo and it's all better. You are an odious person with foul personal habits offensive to the opposite sex? Try a love potion. Anyplace you are, anything you want can most likely be transfigured out of handy garbage to fill a temporary need. Or if not, Confound a shop clerk to get it.

Wizards were used to magic adapting whatever they had to create solutions. No matter the problem, wave your wand to fix it. Granted, there were a few exceptions, and morals got in the ways sometimes, but they had no NEED for common sense in most cases!

So, by and large, they never developed any.

The strange thing was, that WORKED for them in most instances! So wizards could afford to be incompetent imbeciles, because in most cases they lived a life completely free of the consequences of bad planning, poor thinking, and an extreme lack of common sense. Magic was so flexible that it could save people from the consequences of their stupidity almost every time.

And, the natural result of people raised without consequences for stupid actions was they never learned to overcome their stupidity. It gave you a nation full of fools.

The major reason for the pureblood craze was: among wizards that practice worked. They could afford to be fools and not get hurt for it.

And up against muggles magic proved to be enough of an advantage that it still worked. But against those muggle-raised able to use magic?

It failed every time.

Muggleborns had both magic and common sense, the best of each. That gave the magic-raised a deep seated fear of the muggleborn witches and wizards. Clear-thinking spell-users frightened the magic-raised of Europe.

Probably why people had been so scared of vulturewart in the last war, even if they didn't know it. Before he dipped himself so deeply in pureblood ways, he'd been one of those clear thinking magic users they feared so.

But Harry didn't care two knuts for that fear and was going to be applying the advantages of muggle thinking to the magical problem of home defense. And in the first place, that meant building solid structures - but roomy ones, because otherwise the wizards who moved into them would want to be adding a new bathroom on the fourth floor with nothing under supporting it, and so on until they'd assembled enough insane bits to make another Weasley home.

So if the homes were big to start with the wizards couldn't scream as much when he said they couldn't add expansions onto them magically.

Actually, on the lines of a defensive structure already strong enough to need little in the way of magic to defend, one of the ideal layouts was already centuries old, that of the fortified suburban villa. Solid brick and masonry had stood up as one of the most enduring construction styles over time, and good thick walls didn't have to have as much magic protecting them to keep the bad guys out. Dwarf-built structures were even stronger, and the more strength you got through basic properties the less you had to add via magic.

A square structure four or five stories tall, enclosing a courtyard in the center that you then capped with an arched ceiling made out of

blocks of transparent stone - or even a dome enchanted like the Hogwarts Great Hall's ceiling to let the light through.

That way the kids could run and play out on the grass under trees without leaving the confines of the house out where marauding bands of vampires or Death Nibblers could get at them.

Give them reasons to stay inside. Make it convenient to stay safe, and they are more liable to do so. Then put wide lawns between villas so that they had clear fields of fire so those within could shoot people approaching the house.

A place that size could easily sport a dozen bedrooms, several sitting rooms, a ballroom and library. The design was intended for spacious, aristocratic living. Rather more than a single family needs, but considering that with the dangers of the recurring wars it was better to stay indoors under protection than go out too often, it was better to have too much space than too little. Even add a principle or two adopted from the middle-class Roman Domus and add space for a shop or two opening out onto the street.

No one defense would stop everything. But a good, strong, solidly built stone house was an excellent point to start off with. Already strong, they could be magically strengthened yet further and made very highly resistant to most harmful spells. Tile roofs and little or no exposed timber left nothing to burn, so fire (one of the most frequently used weapons in warfare) was less dangerous. A house-sized variant of the bubble-head charm could even be developed if he felt poison gasses were a danger.

Sections of Europe had, during some of their more difficult and turbulent periods, gone through styles where they'd studded their wooden doors with metal spikes. They looked decorative. In fact most people never realized what they were for. But you did that so no one would try to break down your door with his shoulder, and it greatly complicated chopping through the thing with axes. So, if you worried about those, spiking your doors was a good idea.

Harry was concerned about those, so he spiked the doors. He wasn't so much afraid of wizards trying to brute-force their way through. No,

smashing in a door with their bodies was far too physical, they'd prefer to use spells to gain a forcible entry if that's what they wanted. But he was concerned about werewolves. There were a lot of them in England, desperate enough they were willing to follow anyone who promised them even a hint of freedom, and clawing through doors lay exactly within their temperament and abilities.

So Harry not only spiked the doors, he used a magic process that effectively electroplated those spikes with silver (and laid down spells so the thin plating would not wear off during use). Then, because werewolves were not the only physically strong magical race with a penchant for following dark lords, he crafted each of the base plates of those spikes into silver crosses, to help keep any vampires out.

You could never be too careful about that sort of thing.

Speaking of careful, he did the same silver plated cross motif with all of the door handles, window latches, window shutters (shutters that could be closed from inside the house, and spiked for the exact same reasons as the doors) and just about all other 'grab this to obtain access' parts of those houses.

It would make living there practically impossible for people like Remus. But if you couldn't make it safe for him AND everyone else, first make it safe for everyone else. He could be dealt with as a special case, and he was the only werewolf Harry knew of who wasn't at least partially complicit in dark lord worship... No. That had to be retracted. The man served Dumbledore. So in spite of the innocence of his intentions, perhaps it was best to keep him out.

No hard feelings, just trying to create a place safe for the rest of us. Remus wouldn't be in any more danger than he already was, but everyone else could be made that much safer.

And werewolf attacks were a big problem during the last war, so they had to have a defense against them. Sorry, that was just the way it was.

That left giants and dementors as major threats to be dealt with. Dementors could and would be kept out by the town wards. Harry

couldn't think of any good reason for them ever to go there, and so he'd already built his wards so those nightmarish wraiths were deliberately and specifically excluded. And, muggles had gotten one or two things right in their folklore. Dementors were one of surprisingly many dark creatures driven off by the sound of church bells. So Harry planned to build a few churches just so he could put bell towers in them.

Giants, on the other hand, were a threat not easily stopped by wards, and couldn't care less about bells. There were spells, however, for strengthening stone walls and things to better survive the kind of damage they dealt. The buildings would have to be built strong to start with, as those spells only magnified what strength you already had, but that was his intention anyway.

And, while giants could not easily be stopped by wards or bells, there were counters for them too. Dementors did not care about physical guardians, but giants could be quite effectively dealt with by guardian statues.

Giants were big and tough and strong, but stone statues could always be built bigger and tougher and stronger, especially with toughness and strength increased by those same spells that magnified the strength of buildings.

Giants were the tanks of magical battlefields. But tanks could be stopped if you were prepared to deal with them beforehand. One of the best ways was always to build your own tanks. So, stopping giants with guardian golems was just something he planned to do.

Of course, once you stripped away all of the helpful followers, dark wizards would still be a problem; even if they couldn't march in behind ranks of allied werewolves, vampires, giants or dementors. In fact, one of their favorite strategies would be to crack open the defenses themselves, then send in those same allies once they'd put a stop to the defenses keeping them out.

Then again, dark wizards were bullies. Their idea of a fair fight was to pull some dirty trick to get you helpless before them, then torture you.

They were not big fans of being in the least kind of danger themselves.

They'd try to get into those houses on some pretext or other, then start their mayhem there, catching their prey by surprise and without defenses.

So you adopt a Victorian concept. This wasn't hard to do, as wizards were already living in a largely pre-Victorian age in most ways, so it was a fairly painless process to propose.

A Victorian House had two parlors, a guest parlor and then a family one. When guests came over they saw only the entry hall and the guest parlor. They were not permitted into any other part of the home. It just wasn't done. If you were a very, very close friend, they might invite you into the family parlor, and this was taken to mean that you were as close as family; but you still weren't permitted up into their bedrooms or other 'family only' areas of the house.

Perhaps the division did not have to be that extreme. Let your guests roam over the whole ground floor of your house, into the atrium, ballroom, even the workshops. Just ensure that the ground floor was all they could reach.

If an enemy NEVER got up into your private quarters it was hard for him to lay nasty traps for you up there. Everyone needs a safe place, a place to be secure so they can rest and recuperate. The Death Nibblers had that by fraud, wearing masks and saying, "Oh, WE'RE not the people hurting you! It isn't US!" so their homes were inviolate as they rarely got charged for their crimes. As soon as they took the masks off they were safe from reprisal.

Other people... well, since the terrorists under vulturewart didn't care to let the same rules that protected them protect others, you had to keep them out by main force.

Harry knew he'd mocked wizards for hiding behind wards, turtling up to avoid having to face a threat, but the fact of the matter was you could not defend against magical attackers without magical defenses. If he could blow through your walls with a Reducto curse it didn't

matter what you'd done to bar the door, so to speak. So defensive wards were a simple necessity.

However, to maximize the benefit of the wards, you don't sap their strength by doing stupid stuff with them, and one of the most stupid things to avoid was slapping them onto a weak structure - or a poorly designed one.

Building a defensible home shared many of the same principles as building a secure vault, or secure anything. The first principle of defensive structures was 'make it hard for an enemy to access'. And, for a magical house, that included cutting off or restricting magical means of entry.

Since wizards were almost the epitome of stupid, and would be inviting guests over and holding balls or opening shops, all of which provided a flood of opportunities to sneakily insert polyjuiced agents or assassins in, Harry decided that each of these homes, small fortresses really, he was building in Godric's Hollow ought to have two alert statuses: relaxed and vigilant.

The relaxed state would be just that: low security so those stupid, stupid people could go about their lives with a minimum of fuss and bother, letting near total strangers into their homes and so on. Even in that state he would insist on protections for keeping all but family (and family servants) out of the 'family only' areas of the house. But they could still have all the guests they wanted over on the ground floor.

The vigilant alert status would be for when it struck those bone-thick skulls of theirs that there were Death Eaters out there on raids killing people, and they'd want to button up tight to avoid being on some vampire's menu for the evening, or having some werewolf nibbling on their children.

But, of course, some general protections would apply during both.

Anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards were the start (really, those were the same thing. A portkey was just a set-destination apparation stored in an object, just like a potion could sometimes be called a

spell in a bottle). But that didn't even cover half of it. The next step was to put the floo access in a separate outbuilding. Connect it by a covered walk, so it wasn't unpleasant to use even in bad weather; but if you are going to get attacked by wizards arriving through your floo, have them arrive in a gazebo a short distance away from your home instead of in your living room.

So called 'secure' floo systems were nothing of the sort. They were either made that way by the ministry department regulating them (and which the Death Eaters had agents in since the first war, to undo those protections at will) or they were merely warded like any other entrance. And anything you could put a ward on, someone else could break the ward on; and with the ability to floo-call, sticking only your head (and hands, if you wanted) through a fire to someone else's floo, an invader could be working on breaking your wards from a thousand miles away without you even knowing of it.

If the floo was in a separate outbuilding, without even any fireplaces inside the main house, breaking the wards was just the first step, especially in the case of a gazebo, where visibility all around meant anyone around could see someone's head and hands poking through and sound the alarm.

If there was even a fireplace inside the main building, that could be hooked up to the floo by that same ministry department the Death Nibblers had agents in. So you instead rely on central heating and do away with fireplaces entirely - leaving the gazebo the only place you could floo to or from.

They made them beautifully, a single central pillar style chimney with an open faced fireplace large enough to walk into without stooping down. They made it facing a gap in the six sided gazebo where the railing did not extend, so a witch or wizard in a hurry would not have to pause on their way in, or worry about striking their heads on a railing on their way out. They even made some with multiple fireplaces for those who wanted to do a lot of floo traffic. In fact, they made triple fireplaces on a shared central chimney standard so a young witch could still go to market while her Aunt Edna was floo-calling some of her friends and mom was on the line with someone else.

It cost virtually nothing to build the extra fireplaces from the get-go, and it was really a remarkable convenience, which did a lot to make up for having to leave your house to use it. They also looked a bit like an outdoor barbecue built into its own convenient structure.

Then back to the main house. Your entry points are your weak points, and an enemy was going to try to access them just as you did. The trick there was to make it easy and convenient for yourself, but as close to impossible as you could devise for your enemy.

One of the first things to do is grant yourself sort of a gatehouse approach where each of the entrances or exits to your home was actually a small room with two doors, like an airlock. One led into the house proper, one led into the outside world. In the middle you put a place to hang cloaks and put up muddy shoes so it looked merely like a place for donning or doffing winter garments without tracking snow in over your nice carpets, and to help keep out drafts.

You do the same with all of your staircases, or other means of reaching anything but the ground floor, to seal off your private areas. And most of the time people had no reason to suspect this was anything other than an interesting architectural feature, something quaint and rustic to slow the spread of fires or to keep down drafts.

That was the illusion. The reality was that they did do all those things, but the design was also capable of serving a far more sinister purpose.

During low security times you could open both doors of the house entrances and leave them that way so customers could enter your shop or guests could come to your balls, or whatever. And it would be just as easy or convenient as anything else.

The stairway equivalents of the same thing would stay sealed at all times except to authorized family members and servants, and it would stay not only safe but convenient because most people had no real legitimate excuse to go into those areas anyway.

Then, during lockdown, you expel the guests and seal up all your entrances. No one stays inside that you don't trust to fight alongside you instead of against you, and given the prevalence of polyjuice and imperious curses, it was safer to send even those types away to their own homes anyway.

It was foolhardy to have untrustworthy elements inside your defenses when it came time to fight or die. But it was important to lay down the policy in clean, crisp clarity, because given their druthers, wizards would be fools.

But, because it was unfriendly to fling your guests out the door and straight into the teeth of an invading army, they'd have to establish policies to enact lockdown in an atmosphere of danger, rather than at the very last second when you could already see the enemy on his way.

That meant he'd probably be forced to erect public dance halls and buildings where everyone was a guest, and no one would get expelled, because they wouldn't stop having parties just because people were trying to kill them.

And... that naturally meant those public parties would be the first choice of every Death Eater for a place to attack. And they'd start each attack by having people on the inside as invited guests start flinging curses. And then the witches and wizards holding those parties would wonder how it happened.

Bloody idiots. Sometimes he had to wonder if it was worth saving these fools.

But back to the houses, where hopefully at least some portion of these imbeciles would eventually learn to take cover. The outer door of the home's entranceways was what an invading enemy was going to hit first. So you put no more than average defenses on them, as whatever you put there they are going to analyze and expect, and thus break through rather quickly.

So you set the outer door with something simple, expected, either a key or a passcode (or, for better security, both). The key could be

stolen, summoned, or copied, while spoken codes could be gotten by Imperious, or just by agents standing by under invisibility cloaks, or similar, listening as you used them.

You don't worry too much about him getting in the outer door. Your strategy depends on it. From there, however, it becomes twofold: don't let him in the inner door, and don't let him out again either. So, in the first place, you set it so whatever key or code gets a person in WON'T get him out again! That places him up against the full strength of the walls and wards without an easy out.

Trapped like that, you could destroy him at your leisure. Whether that was to call in Ministry aurors to haul him away, or to deal with yourself, once you had him trapped he was in your power to do with as you chose.

Of course the problem lies in keeping them there. Once they realize they're trapped they won't want to stay. They'll use every device and skill at their disposal to escape (either in to hurt you or out to safety).

The simplest things are the easiest to make reliable. There are more ways to break delicate clockwork than a simple brick wall. This applied to magic as well. Any wards could be broken. But most wards could NOT be broken by most people, and even then the stronger your wards the fewer could break them, especially on short notice.

Wardstones had a certain capacity, and even supported by appropriate runic amplifiers they could only hold so much of a burden of spells. Decision-making portions ate up a ton of that capacity, so wards that didn't have to make choices could be much, much stronger than those that did. And the more complex those decisions had to be, the more capacity they ate, and the more flaws those introduced, so the weaker your warding scheme overall.

Of course, wizards set wards as they did anything else - with an eye toward their own maximum convenience. "Well, let my family enter, and of course my friends, and let me change who my friends are, of course, and..." Such a ward scheme, to be completely unobtrusive, had to not only track by blood relation, but the whims and vagaries of

emotions out of all those members. That tied up a terrible amount of capacity to serve simple convenience.

Harry's answer was simple: don't have the wards make any choices at all unless you absolutely had to.

Say instead, "Those I invite are welcome. Those I don't aren't." It was not much less convenient. All it required was to recall a single step, and not an impolite one. But rather than trying to keep a ward busy reading your mind for just how you felt about someone on a certain day, taking over that responsibility yourself made for far more powerful protections.

That pattern continued. The more choices about who entered and who did not you made yourself, the more power those wards could focus on keeping you safe rather than being your own personal, magical mood ring, until it was almost impossible even for someone of Vulturewart's skill and power to break and gain entry. Particularly on short notice.

And, if the outer door has an entry code that's easy to overhear or guess, he won't think he has to break down your wards to enter your house. So he won't come prepared to do so - that requires work, and most wizards (but ESPECIALLY Dark Wizards) are lazy, not doing work they don't have to.

So, you trap him. And in the first place, you set it so that none of the doors leading inside from the isolated little entrance halls could be opened from the outside during lockdown if there was any family member home at all.

That put it up to a person to decide whether or not to let whoever it was at the door in or to drop some nasty trap on them.

Of course, before you pour sixty tons of boiling hot sand on his head you want to know whether this intruder was a pushy salesman or a murderer, or just your dad returning from work but lost his keys.

Or, for the upcoming war, you had to know if that WAS your dad, but under Imperious. Or just possibly someone under polyjuice to only

look like a family member. Those were very real dangers because all of those things had happened during the last war, and the same baddies were going to come back to fight the next one.

Those strategies had been effective for them, so they'd use them again.

So you hang a Foe Glass at head height right beside every door opening to an entranceway, in a place where you can't help but glance at it as you go to the door. Then you also put a peephole through the door itself, and tell people, "If the face you see in that Foe Glass is the face of the person on the other side of that door, you don't open it no matter who it is. They could be your wife, your parent, child, even your long lost aunt. If they show up in the Foe Glass, they are your enemy. That might be because they could be under Imperious, or they could be using Polyjuice, but whoever it is they are not your friend."

Then have a top-quality Sneakoscope hanging there to help detect any other underhanded business, like a guy under an invisibility cloak holding a wand to the back of your father's head. While a Dark Arts Detector will likely tell you if there are other things that might be a danger to you - thing like zombies, which have no minds, thus feel no malice to show up in a Foe Glass, and can't feel sneaky either to show up on the Sneakoscope.

Build all these devices right into the doorframe where you basically **MUST** look at them in order to open the inner door. If any of them give off warnings, trigger off something to knock out those in the entryway, so you could investigate at your leisure.

But the overarching thought was, if your alarms showed them as an enemy, **Don't Let Them In!**

You had to stop both approaches. Lacking easy means of tricking an entry, they'd try to blast their way in. If blasting was too difficult, they'd try and trick their way in. It was like making a bowl to hold water, if there was any gap at all that was where they'd go through. So you had to defend against it all or you weren't safe.

Then, for cases where everything went FUBAR, have a final redoubt ready, a double-Fidelius covered survival shelter in the sub-basement. Make it so each parent held one secret, so no one person could give away all of the key. Then have them swear Unbreakable Vows not to tell the secrets under duress, or to any hostile party.

If your enemies were going to kill you, at least make them work for it.

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Author's Notes:

Most of these tools exist in the original series. In fact, virtually all of them. I just arranged them in a "Gosh, you know this thing that shows the face of your nearest enemy? Why don't they use that to, like, guard their homes? Because that WOULD stop Imperioused moles and polyjuiced impostors."

And the rest kind of grew from there.

Chapter Forty-Five
by Lionheart

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Author's Forward:

You know, there was a time when I used to get angry over harsh reviewers.

Now? I view it as an opportunity.

I LOVE ticking off those who callously try to harsh my mellow. They forget who is in charge of this story. They don't like something? Fine. I can give them a Double Helping!

And seconds after that. Then, if that doesn't work, perhaps I shall venture out into the 'Unexplained Unwanted Crossover' territory once again! You know, I've been collecting some very old cartoons recently. Perhaps this should become a Thundercats crossover?

Don't You Think I Won't!!!!

I was VERY pleased with my latest chapter of this, only to get panned by people disliking it for not being an action thriller.

Let's make something VERY clear here: I write for fun. This amuses me. If it does not amuse you, go elsewhere. But until you pay my salary, I don't have to give a DAMN what you think.

And my typical response to that sort of thing is: if you don't like something, expect me to give you MORE of it! So, there won't be ANY action in this fic for a good, loooong time!

If you don't like it, go piss up a rope. You don't have any right to eat forty four bowls of ice cream (for free, I might add) and then complain you don't like the flavor.

For that matter, you don't have any rights at all. I'm in charge here.

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"Simple logic, the wizards never use it." Hermione thought aloud as Harry'd finished explaining his town proposal.

"I just thought of the perfect way to completely destroy the Burrow," Luna bubbled cheerily. "Point a wand at it and say, 'Finite'."

"It would work, too," Harry good-naturedly grumbled.

"Although you could have gone much further on the traps," Hermione lectured.

"No," Harry shook his head. "I am NOT layering lethal traps around where careless, stupid people are going to hang out. I'd end up killing more of them than the enemy."

"I hadn't thought about that," the girl conceded, descending deep in thought.

"It is a truly good defense plan," Luna bubbled happily skipping along. "I think only weak link is the wizards themselves. They'd ignore the foe glass, invite death eaters in for tea, accept their request use the bathroom upstairs, etc."

"I've already thought of that!" Harry pointed a finger excitedly. "In fact, I have a speech prepared to give them as they move in."

"Oh?" Both girls' eyebrows raised.

"Do share?" Hermione prompted.

Harry paused, cleared his throat, and posed as if addressing an audience. "Welcome to Godric's Hollow. We have built this town to survive the upcoming wars. There are certain things we know the enemy will be doing - because they did them the last time and that worked out well for them. We have included defenses against all of those tactics. However, we admit that none of you are accustomed to using these security features. Until you are, you cannot be certain of your safety. So we have hired Fred and George Weasley as a

security service. They will conduct mock attacks on their own pace and schedule to train you in how to recognize threats and use your defenses against them."

Both girls immediately broke out in ferocious giggles.

Harry grinned widely. "I figure we give them a bounty of twenty galleons for every house they break into to mercilessly prank the occupants."

"Better start them at five," Hermione cautioned. "They'll be breaking into enough at the start, already. They'd cost you a fortune."

"That's true," Harry admitted good-naturedly.

"But if setting Fred and George Weasley onto them can't teach people caution they're a lost cause." Luna admired with her own grin.

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "Exactly! And they can easily make their 'mock attacks' unpleasant enough to make people WANT to avoid them in the future! Make them want to Very Much!"

"So they'd learn to use the security features," Hermione concluded, with her own grin, "Probably in record time, too."

"And better to be afflicted with ten foot long, wriggling purple toes than a Cruciatus any day," Harry nodded primly.

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Freeing Fawkes was a perfect activity for a 'Bedevil Dumbledore' Day.

The binding of a phoenix requires two things that were nearly impossible to obtain: the creature's first pile of ash, and the eggshell, both artifacts left over from the amazing bird's first and original creation.

Since the creation of a new phoenix was a practically unknown thing, the lengths to which one had to go to obtain these components were in some ways more legendary than the artifact that could use them to

bind it. But without them, no true and permanent binding could be placed on one. They were far too powerful for any ordinary magic to succeed.

Both were also destroyed in the ritual that bound the phoenix, so it could only ever be bound that way once, even theoretically. So releasing Fawkes was a one-way street. They couldn't just rebind him to themselves. Actually, the bird was liable to be so traumatized by the experience of having been bound to the vile creature that was Dumbledore that humanity was never likely to see that particular phoenix again after the trio set it free.

The Fey might, since they were the ones setting it free. But still, it was liable to be a century or two before it acquired even that amount of bravery.

They had no way of knowing how Dumbledore had obtained the priceless and legendary ingredients necessary for binding Fawkes to him. In truth, they'd probably never know, for that type of secret was one that he would not only hold close, as it gave him tremendous prestige to let people assume the bird had chosen to be his companion, but also the secret was old and buried.

Dumbledore had owned Fawkes since he was a fairly young man, and he had no reason to review documents regarding how he had done so. The binding was, to all intents and purposes, permanent and inescapable.

Frankly, the ritual for releasing a creature bound by the Goblet was one of those things that had been lost for a very long time, which probably explained why the Fairy Queen had simply given it to them, rather than telling them to go look it up somewhere, searching in some obscure book, relic or ruin.

They were her agents, not the other way around. The act of doing something was by and large left up to them, when such a thing was possible. So, it stood to reason that looking that ritual up themselves was impossible - that it did not exist in any form they could find by themselves. Otherwise she wouldn't have provided it for them.

But back to the ritual.

The act of binding a creature with the Goblet created a mystical chain. This was no device that had to be concealed or worn. It was a physical device, but one that existed out of phase with the rest of reality. It could only be called into being by the goblet itself, using a very specific ritual - but not a very exciting one. A bunch of runes and some arithmancy, plus the goblet.

They had done so, drawing the runes and circles after performing the proper equations. Then they'd left it to cook, essentially, energy building along those lines until it had drawn Fawkes' chain into phase with the rest of reality. That had taken one day.

That had accomplished the first stage of the process necessary to free Fawkes. Now they had a chain whose heavy links were composed of congealed darkness, blotting out all light touching them, and which glowed green or red in spots where each link was engraved with runes.

Hermione made a copy of those runes at once, hoping to study them. That they were obscure and practically unknown she took as a given, considering how ancient, rare and powerful this ritual was, but she'd still wanted a copy.

Luna was more concerned with petting Fawkes.

The bird's presence was unnecessary, but they could understand it wanting to see this stage, or indeed any part of this ritual. It was its freedom at stake, after all.

They'd have been interested too, if it was theirs on the line.

The next step was to destroy that chain - no easy task, and one that again could only be accomplished by the very fires of the goblet that had forged it.

Frankly, Harry and Hermione shared a glance, each thinking it odd how many parallels existed between this and Frodo's destroying the

ring in the fires of Mount Doom. It was uncomfortably close to what was written in those novels by a supposed muggle.

Luna, for her part, was instead delighted by the similarities and wrote up an extra credit report for History of Magic on the subject.

Hermione gave her an O+, then quickly folded up and hid the report, so that it never got turned in - as they didn't want Dumbledore to see it.

However, as most of what that ritual wanted was time and exposure to the fires of the Goblet, there wasn't much to do after the initial runes had been set, and a certain amount of daily maintenance attended to.

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For Harry, having retrieved the ring with the Peverell coat of arms from the Gaunt family shack was a complete non-issue.

He had the memories of the man who'd set all the traps. Plus, Riddle had set those protections when he was a teenager, and Harry possessed the skills of that man from when he was very old, after half a century of extra study. It was no more dangerous than a routine shopping trip to go and pick up that priceless artifact, remove various curses around and on it, dispose of the soul fragment, then have himself an ancient ring with mysterious powers.

Heck, magically popping there and back, it hadn't taken him even fifteen minutes total for the whole trip.

And, whatever else that ring was, it WAS an artifact of the Founders. Even if Slytherin hadn't made it, he'd still worn it. And it was entirely possible that old codger had been the one to construct its present form, because legends lost track of it as merely a stone, but now it was a ring - and someone had to have done the conversion from loose stone to piece of jewelry.

The most likely person was Salazar Slytherin, and that made it priceless.

Its powers made it more so.

Naturally, there wasn't a great deal known about the stone, nor the ring form of it, and they might have separate powers in the different versions. They wouldn't be the first magical artifact that did, look at how the Cauldron of Plenty had been converted to a necromantic zombie animating device.

Frankly, most of what Harry knew about the ring naturally came from Tom Riddle, and that ambitious and power-mad boy wouldn't have hidden it away in a shack he'd never intended to visit again if he'd coveted its powers. No, if that was the case he could have and would have used something else, and kept the thing that granted useful abilities.

In short, Tom had only known that it once belonged to Salazar Slytherin, and that he'd claimed it in combat from the last of his family.

Pitiful, really.

Riddle had spent so much time researching ancient magic, both spells and objects, that it was terribly ironic how this one slipped through his fingers, almost literally. Then again, the holders of the device had been more or less completely ignorant of its powers, as well. So it wasn't like a great deal of lore existed about the ring. To those who knew of its existence, it conveyed status through association with the Founder, nothing more.

But, even though most of its powers were unknown, retrieving the device had the effect of exciting more curiosity concerning ancient artifacts among his two girlfriends.

And, having only just come from maintaining the ritual for setting Fawkes free, one naturally got reminded of the Goblet.

"It's a pity we don't know about the others. The Water one, for example. I can't help but imagine it must be terribly useful for potions and things," Hermione confessed, toying with a lock of her hair.

Harry answered her as he finished putting tools away, "Well, some of the rumors are that the Fountain of Youth is the Water part of this matching set of elemental vessels. Water is the Healing Element, and according to rumors that part of this set can produce endless amounts of any liquid and all who drink from it are healed of any disease or wound save death. Some confused that with the Earth Cauldron, but as far as we can tell, our Cauldron doesn't possess any of those powers."

She gasped, and he couldn't help an amused chuckle as he continued, "There is some speculation that the Elysian Fields, or other paradise myths of the Greek and Norse pantheons (which bear some remarkable similarities, by the way) were simply a product of prolific use of this device's properties to heal on a massive scale. Everything there would be healthy, and by being healthy beautiful. It would certainly look like a paradisaical land of plenty where any sensible creature might hope to spend eternity, compared to most places. And also the wizards masquerading as gods would want to restrict entry to themselves and those closest to them, to avoid crowding."

Hermione's eyes had gone wide.

Harry no longer even tried to conceal his grin as he continued explaining, "And that would explain the migration of that site. In the earliest myths, like the Homeric writings, Elysium existed in the far west, the dimly explored and therefore wonder-filled western regions of the Mediterranean Sea. Naturally a lot of explorers went looking for it and later writers had to transport it to beyond the ocean rim. So the storytellers like Hesiod, writing a century after Homer, speak of 'the Islands of the Blest' lying out in the Atlantic. And then as even that started to get explored, it got relocated to the underworld. That might actually follow the route of locations the Olympian wizards moved it to trying to avoid massive muggle migrations to their garden spot."

"And, if you hide something well enough, it can get lost." Luna chimed in.

"Or, contrariwise, if you don't hide it well enough, it can get stolen." Harry gave a caution. "Not all of those supposed 'gods' liked to share,

even with their fellow 'gods'. Pantheons got along about as well as Hogwarts students."

Luna was unruffled. "Or, Ponce de Leon could have been a wizard who knew what he was looking for, following clues that have since been lost, when he devoted himself to trying to find the Fountain of Youth in the New World. It would follow the generally westerly direction the Olympians moved it in trying to avoid a mass muggle migration into their pocket paradise."

"That firms up Water a bit. That leaves only the device for Air." Hermione mused aloud, somewhat used to wonders now, having been in this group and subject to the near-constant surprises for a while.

Harry nodded. "According to Riddle's research, using all that he could glean from the library of the Unspeakables, the most reliable rumors for the remaining object of this set describe it as a Horn of Air. Its last known location wasn't even known, only suggested, at Aeolia, the home of Aeolus, the favored mortal of the gods who received the power of controlling the winds, mentioned in Homer's epic poem, the Odyssey. The device itself is not referenced directly, but we know the Greek Gods to have been witches and wizards, and we also know that Aeolus was a real person, a magician just like us. Also most of the other creatures, kings and places mentioned in that poem were real and possessed the powers they were described as having, or near enough. So where did Aeolus get his power to control wind from?"

Hermione's eyes brightened in understanding. "And the Greeks were a very maritime people!" she blurted, excitedly. "So if they were to have any of these devices you'd naturally expect them to be water or wind related, as those are the forces that matter most at sea!"

"Actually, some very credible rumors once stated the item for Fire was once in the volcano Vulcan used as his forge, but it wasn't. It never was. You have to be careful about rumors, because they are often wrong." Luna cautioned.

"The primary contender for the 'Fountain of Youth is the Water part of this matching set' theory is that it was a giant sea shell and the wizard Poseidon once owned it," Harry added his own caution. "This kind of search can be maddening, because you never really know who was right until the whole thing is over and you have the authentic device in your hand. Some of the very credible hints about the location of the Cauldron of Blood were wrong. But they sounded reasonable at the time, and led many searchers astray."

Luna bobbed her head fervently. "Agreed. When something remains lost even when people are trying very hard to find it, there is often a reason why."

"And countless maritime powers would have loved to possess a device that could enable them to control winds," Harry suggested, then shrugged. "Who knows? Some of them may even have had it, just kept that fact quiet. I certainly don't intend to advertise that I have both devices thought lost out of the Deathly Hallows trio. I'd have to deal with as many people trying to kill me for them as usually haunts those after the Elder Wand."

Luna clung to his side as she offered, "Vikings crossing the Atlantic, Magellan circumnavigating the world, Sir Francis Drake having unaccountable luck in his pillaging of Spanish ships - the Spanish themselves being so amazingly lucky in discovering the New World in the first place. Perhaps Christopher Columbus had it as a loan from a minister under Queen Isabella, then it got passed on to later conquerors, and Drake captured it in one of his daring raids? Perhaps that is what led to the Spanish Armada getting defeated so handily when it was widely feared they would conquer our island home? These are all theories that may or may not have any truth behind them."

The blonde girl blinked slowly, almost too slowly. "Although, some of the most amazing things do turn out to be real. I happen to own the Girdle of Lions, a magic belt owned by the Amazon Queen Hippolyte and object of a quest by Hercules. I'm wearing it now. It was one of those treasures stuck and forgotten in the Department of Mysteries. Gramma Alice recovered it at the same time as she removed Great Aunt Dorothy's Ruby Slippers from their care."

Hermione's eyes were bulging as she recognized the famous shoes Luna had been wearing all this time.

She nearly fainted.

Harry nodded soberly. "A large part of the reason Voldemort wanted control there was to make use of the many artifacts stuffed down in the basement, like Dumbledore already had used the stuff under the halls of Hogwarts."

Luna shrugged, happy to have that effect on people. "They also had, and we recovered, the Girdle of Odysseus that enables its wearer to swim for three full days. But I prefer this one."

"A girdle?" Hermione asked, thinking of one of her mother's undergarments.

Harry quickly interposed. "The modern definition of that word means a form of underwear, but anciently it was outerwear, just a broad belt, often used to hold weapons. They were frequently magical, which was why heroes were sometimes sent to fetch them on quests."

"Oh." Hermione colored. "I grew up thinking those were the classic equivalent of a panty raid."

The other two snorted in laughter, although it was quickly suppressed. Then they changed the subject delicately.

"What does it do?" Harry gave Luna a cuddle, rubbing his hands along the belt with the cat motif she'd been wearing for... oh, it seemed like a very long time now.

"About what you'd expect," the blonde answered cheerily. "It enables me to speak with felines, and most will regard me as friendly and obey reasonable commands; though you have to recall these are cats and have a different idea of what is reasonable or not. Fortunately most will be at least a little helpful due to the novelty of a talking human. It also enhances my ability to do catlike things, like climb,

hide, jump, and take minimum damage from falls - all very valuable to a warrior people like the Amazons, or Hercules."

Hermione's mind had leapt ahead, connecting things, and she blurted, "It was that girdle that enabled you to survive that fall off the Astronomy Tower!"

"Yes," Luna nodded. "And climb up the outside of Gryffindor Tower to fetch Harry, as I'd needed his help. Without this, Draco's attempt to murder me would have succeeded. Grandmother Alice thwarted that nicely with this gift." Here she paused, a look of confusion crossing her face. "And I don't truly know if that was deliberate or not. Grandmother Alice can be... odd."

Hermione's hair practically stood on end at that statement.

Harry was rubbing the grip on his wand thoughtfully. "Actually, I think it's about time we put some serious effort toward cataloging at least some of what we got out of those raids. As this gift highlights, they just might offer us capabilities we need to fend off unwelcome surprises."

"And," Luna offered wisely, "As your ring highlights, we won't necessarily understand what we've found, or what it could do for us. The majority of those things stored in there were unlabeled and their powers forgotten."

"But it won't hurt to try for the few that are usable," Harry grinned.

"Well," ever-practical Hermione stated, "Be that ever so excellent an idea, we still ought to devote THIS day to causing headaches for Dumbledore, and the one thing we've done already he won't notice until hopefully it's too late for him to do anything about. So, while I agree in principle that doing that is a fine idea, let's save it for our next Resource Day."

She caught them both in her gaze, "So, what fires can we light under him today?"

The next time Dumbledore went up the stairs to his office a great big round stone came rolling down on top of him, crushing him flat and cut into pieces against the serrated edges of the steps.

Then, when he was leaving the secret chamber in the basement after being revived, he was struck by a pair of sleep darts and keeled over flat on his face in the corridor.

Then a pair of pixies flew in and cut away that bit scar tissue above his left knee that was a perfect map of the London Underground.

The trio figured a scar like that didn't happen by accident, and if it was still even remotely accurate after all they'd done to him, then he was updating and maintaining it, so he found it useful, and anything that he found useful they wanted to remove.

They also figured that by NOT killing him at the same time as it was removed, but by force-feeding him a potion that could regrow skin, the loss wouldn't count as a recent wound when next he was being revived, and so wouldn't be regenerated when his next body got created - they hoped.

If not, then the pixies leaving him tied up in his own hair, stuck to a giant acromantula web in the Forbidden Forest was still amusing enough.

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Author's Notes:

I truly love tying ancient myths and legends into the ancient artifacts part of this fic. It just seems to truly suit the world.

And, it's a great deal of fun, as well, taking things that were NEVER intended to mesh and tying them all together like they'd been meant to be that way all the time.

And I can include action if I want to. Nyah!

Oh, and btw, that scar is important, too. Anyone guess why? Why is tied in with Fawkes, believe it or not.

Chapter Forty-Six
by Lionheart

|||

Normal Day was quite a letdown after their recent activities on the others. Of course, it was ALSO the only one among their three-times-repeating day schedule they could afford to spend inside Hogwarts itself, as duplicating themselves inside those halls was just asking for trouble of a sort they didn't want.

Naturally, as there were things to do within those halls they couldn't do outside of them, they got a bit of Resource Day and Attack Day mixed in, just to cover things they couldn't do on alternate days.

However, to do that required a certain amount of privacy, just odd moments stolen here or there. But still, that's one of those things where to avoid getting caught, you want to cut down on as many variables as possible, just so you can concentrate on avoiding real trouble.

Surprises are not welcome in that environment.

There came a flash and Harry was blinking spots out of his eyes.

Surprises like, oh, say, getting stalked by a couple of Creevey brothers with their cameras, trying to flash pictures at odd moments.

Hermione's lips firmed up and she walked over to the camera-wielding boys with a determined expression on her face. She talked to them for almost a minute, before turning around to come back with a smug look on her face.

"What was that about?" Luna asked. Harry was still blinking. They'd used more flash powder on that one than he was used to.

The bushy haired bookworm shook her long hair out confidently. "Oh, it just struck me that the Creevey brothers could be distracted from following Harry around or asking for autographs if we introduced them to the idea of making yearbooks and promised to sign theirs at the

end of the year." She directed a hard gaze to her best friend. "You will sign them, won't you?"

Harry was still blinking spots, but that didn't stop him from answering. "To get rid of the random ambushes throughout the year? Absolutely!"

Pivoting smoothly to face the Creeveys, she called out, "He said yes!"

The two blond boys looked overjoyed, and scurried away.

"What's to stop them from turning this into 'A Year In The Life of Harry Potter' like last year?" Harry finally managed to stop blinking.

"Simple," the bookworm answered smugly. "I gave them a set of standards to live up to: pictures of all of the students out of all of the Houses, plus all of the clubs and team members, and so on. If they don't fit those standards you don't sign the book. That should keep them so busy with work they'll have no time for pestering us, except by appointment."

"And," she finished with a smirk, "give it a week and they'll probably go broke from having to buy all that film. Then they CAN'T follow you around, stalking you with a camera!"

|||

Normal day truly felt strange sometimes. It was odd to go from fighting hard to save the world to writing three feet of parchment on the backrub charm. The mind just doesn't manage switches that big so easily.

It seemed like a small eternity since Harry had last attended Potions class. Luckily, it would be even longer before he had to go to one again.

Harry had devised a very simple strategy for dealing with Potions: non-attendance. He could effectively earn his House thirty points on average just by not showing up for Snape to bully him and take them

away. More than that, he didn't even have to break any rules to do it on a continuing basis.

No, he just needed a bit of cleverness.

First he arranged official permission from Professor McGonagall to form a student-only study club; a mutual assistance society covering any subjects they might need, getting an unused classroom set aside for their use.

Harry then went to the day's scheduled Potions class and waited until the next time a Slytherin student did a bit of mischief, spiking someone else's cauldron. Sadly, it didn't take long, only about halfway into their lesson. Looking angry, Harry turned to glare at Snape and challenge, as if in ire over the Slytherin's misbehavior, "Professor McGonagall told us that if she caught anyone not taking her class seriously they would be evicted and told never to return. Are you any less strict than her?"

Snape's gaze turned stormy as he glared at his most hated student. It was clear to anyone that he was offended that Harry was obviously trying to get him to discipline one of his Slytherins. "Are you volunteering, Mr. Potter? Because anytime you feel that way you are free to go and not darken my class again."

Standing up, Harry sneered at his professor and giving a fierce nod, declared, "Since I can't ever picture NOT feeling that way, because I can't respect a subject taught by a childish bully like yourself, I think I'll take advantage of that 'leave and not come back' rule you just said you share with McGonagall."

Harry quickly snatched up his bookbag and left.

Snape's mouth was not yet open to declare the boy's punishment for this bit of cheek before Hermione had also popped up out of her chair. "I think I'll take advantage of that as well, as there isn't anything I'd care to learn from a man as beastly and unfair as yourself!"

To Snape's shock, the entire Gryffindor House pushed back their chairs and rose, grabbing at the books to hurry out. Ron was the only exception, as he was too stunned by this to rise.

Harry and Hermione hadn't planned it that way, but they were glad at this show of House loyalty. Snape, on the other hand, found he was staring at a half-empty classroom before his wits had recovered enough to let him speak.

And he hadn't even punished the cheeky blighters on their way out!

Luna had to fight to keep a smile off her face as she led the next group of students into the Potions classroom. It was just luck that her year's class followed Harry's, but it was a stroke of luck she intended to capitalize on.

Raising her hand to gain her flustered and angry teacher's attention (almost guaranteed to lose forty points for her House right there) she asked in a distracted tone of voice, "Professor Snape, I just heard a story told that Harry and his classmates found a rule that made you throw them out of your classes for good. Is that right?"

"Yes," the greasy haired man bit off angrily. "What of it?"

"Oh." Luna nodded brightly, standing up and picking up her books (which were few, having anticipated this). "Well, in that case, I'd like to take advantage of it myself. Harry's holding a marvelous study group for those who choose not to attend your classes anymore."

And as soon as that, she was out the door.

There came a slight, stunned pause, but before Snape could open his mouth to speak a flood of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students followed her out, leaving the man staring at an empty classroom.

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As a direct result of the 'Great Potions Exodus' (that would leave Snape, at the end of the week, wondering how Albus could let him keep his job - seeing as how he had almost NO non-Slytherin

students, and that was a bit much for the Headmaster to hide on his monthly reports to the school board) Potions became a major subject in the Harry and Hermione study club.

All the ones to walk out of Snape's class were invited, and between the two geniuses instruction was so superior that first lesson, held the evening after just having walked out of Snape's class, as to cast out all doubt that those club members were going to get the best grades in that course the subject had seen in years.

And, seeing the possibility to tweak the Headmaster's nose a bit (seeing how he'd backed Snape so firmly for those many years), Harry'd already arranged with McGonagall to have 'any reasonable supplies' delivered as part of their club. Since the school maintained a student supply cupboard of ingredients for Potions, they made a successful case about those being reasonable, and got their own supply cupboard, carefully monitored by McGonagall.

Harry's draw on those resources alone, all perfectly above-board, taking only needed ingredients for perfectly relevant projects for his potions education, was enough to convince the Deputy Headmistress that her proud group of Gryffindors was going to surpass Snape's Slytherins when it came to OWL grades, and the woman could hardly be happier.

And, of course, there were also Luna and Hermione doing their very level best to catch up to their boy-toy on that subject, and also intending, as he did, to carry a full emergency store of useful potions about.

And their enthusiasm was contagious to the other students in their club.

This was not without a little bit of deliberate help on their part, as it was in all of their best interests for the study club to succeed. As part of his plan to excite the students for learning, Harry approached Eloise Midgen, who set the standard by which really bad acne can be measured, in front of the class, offering her a bottle filled with a familiar potion.

"It's really quite simple," Harry suggested, holding out the bottle. "They teach us to make things, but they never teach us WHY we're making them, or what they could be used for. This is a boil-curing potion. That was our first lesson, and all it did was blow up and cause problems. The only thing it taught us was to hate potions class. Even now I think we should've waited on it til a more advanced class to mix it, when we'd developed more ability to do something dangerous safely. But even so, if you know what you're making can be used for, it is a heck of a lot easier to want to learn how to make it."

He bent down to put the potion into Eloise's unresisting hands, smiling widely all the while. "Because a boil is just another name for acne. They're the same thing, just convenient words for tying them to different parts of the body."

The afflicted girl's eyes shot wider, and she grabbed at the potion, pouring it on a towel she then smeared across her face. Countless girls watched eagerly in baited breath, and when the towel lowered, the legendary landmark for really bad acne was clean - no boils in sight.

The skin on her face was clear.

Eloise shot over to a bathroom to spend half an hour (at LEAST) appreciating her new boil-free complexion, and the rest of the teenaged girls in that room spent a VERY productive day mixing boil-curing potions (absolutely NONE of which exploded, such was the care involved), and other cosmetic treatments Hermione was kind enough to have provided recipes for ahead of time.

The girls of Hogwarts were absolutely hooked.

Showing the boys how to mix a proper dung-bomb got them hooked as well (and would mark a big decline in Zonko's business in the near future).

Having this, Harry approached the Weasley twins with a bit of polyjuice, one of Percy's hairs, the boy's prefect badge, and an explanation of the mischief potentials this represented. And all he

was asking in return was that they help teach any older students they might get in their private Potions club.

The twins agreed in a heartbeat, not least because having their own source of supplies was just too strong a draw for those pranksters to resist!

Normally, Snape hovered over the student supply cupboard like a bat, and only allowed out what he said was required for what he wanted to teach. With the ability to choose what they wanted to mix, and draw out any reasonable ingredients for that from school supplies, they could not only get ahead on their studies and mix things useful to them, but they also had potential to disguise a certain amount of prank mixing among the legitimate research.

The twins were not alone on this. It just had to stay well-hidden.

However Fred and George also reasoned they could supplement the standard supplies, like they always did, with more frequent trips out into the Forbidden Forest, with its cornucopia of dangerous and highly valuable magical ingredients there!

Harry insisted the twins keep it down to a fairly low level, as he explained that the Headmaster would be looking for any excuse to take away this privilege. "Besides," Harry explained with a grin, "Think of this whole thing as a prank against Snape."

The twins gave him some of the widest grins of their lives.

Non-Slytherin attendance of Potions classes dropped to practically nothing inside of two weeks. Although Ron was asked not to return to club meetings after interrupting this impromptu student class for the fifth time with a fairly lame request for someone else to do all of his work for him.

So Ron, alone out of all non-Slytherin Houses, went back to Snape's class - and suffered, as now he was the ONLY target for their aggressions there.

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For the first time in their lives the Weasley Twins had access to all of the best, top of the line potions brewing equipment, and now finally the supplies to use those at near to full capacity.

Naturally this spurred off a slew of inventing.

One of the first new projects was to be a prank, and as usual they tested this by spiking the refreshments at a party in Gryffindor Tower. Someone's birthday party, actually.

The new invention was called Caucasian Creams. It was meant to be a silly party gag, changing skin and hair color for an evening, a harmless prank. And it did produce a fair amount of amusement. Even Harry's dark black unruly hair became as red as his mother's under the influence.

However, it turned out to be as permanent as a dose of Skele-grow - one of those things you don't know when you're experimenting, creating a product for the first time.

A certain amount of upset over that was to be expected.

What those two did NOT expect was to be confronted by the Patil twins the next morning, Parvati wanting her dose to go along with the now strawberry blonde and blue eyed Padma.

It turned out the Weasley twins were not the only identical siblings to go posing as each other around Hogwarts, and the Ravenclaw Patil had been attending the Gryffindor party under guise as her sister, while Parvati spent the evening in the Ravenclaw tower reading their private store of books.

But they couldn't do any of that anymore until they looked identical again.

"But..." Fred began.

"Don't you want," George continued.

"To wait until," Fred rambled on.

"Until Madam Pomphrey comes up with a cure?" both concluded together.

The Patils LAUGHED! drawing attention as this commotion occurred in the Gryffindor common room.

"Now why would we want that?" Padma asked mockingly. "Do you have any idea how many girls from our country would kill to have a complexion like this? Even if she does come up with a cure, I'm not letting Pomphrey get close to me with it."

"Besides," Parvati scoffed. "You both know how Purebloods are in control of all the magical governments of Europe - but what you have no experience with is how deeply, DEEPLY racist they are!"

"Yeah. You're just 'blood-traitors' to their minds," Padma supported.

"While we," Parvati concluded, "Are, not to put it mildly, 'wogs'."

"Having skin like this takes me from 'foreign scum' and 'filthy pussblood' to viable marriage contract for any man in English Pureblood society!" Padma bragged. "And increases the pay I could get out of a Ministry job by a factor of four - at LEAST! Why would I want a cure for that?"

"Even should we go back to India, we'd be FAR more desirable there!" Parvati insisted, before putting her hands on hips to lean over the Weasley Twins and declare, "So where can I get my share of those candies of yours?"

Fred wordlessly produced a Caucasian Cream and the girl gobbled it down right there, soon matching her sister's color tones, identical once again.

"Perfect!" the girls declared, after carefully comparing and finding they could pass for each other again, and causing half the tower to wonder how often they'd done that before.

"Bye!" they skipped out of Gryffindor Tower together, leaving behind a room full of people lost in their thoughts over possibilities they'd missed in their earlier outrage over the skin cream prank.

Yup. Their world was controlled by racists. There was no way of denying that.

So... why not confuse them a bit for a little personal advantage?

Fred and George found themselves confronted by a line of people, Lee Jordan in the front of them, who wanted increased job prospects in Magical England.

So, quite by accident, the twins had stumbled on their first salable product. Very gradually, business would begin to build, as there was vast demand, in and out of Hogwarts, for a dodge to escape the racism of the pureblood elites in control of governments throughout Europe.

They would even eventually, on the Patils' suggestion, began to export the product to India, starting small and growing from there.

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Harry had set up auto-notes quills around Binns at the time he'd bound the spirit to his chair so Myrtle could take over his classes. But at the same time he'd bound the ghost to stay there, he'd also caused him to recite, non-stop all of his lessons for all of his classes for all seven years.

Since Binns never changed anything he ever said in those lessons, they could bind those notes into books and have all seven years of his lectures in book format - where at least they didn't have to deal with his droning, monotonous voice. Stripped of that terrible delivery, they were still dry, just not as bad.

Still, as reference material they made a fairly good encyclopedia of goblin wars and rebellions, and reference material was often a little dry. That didn't matter as much once it was sorted by subject and

well-indexed so you could look things up by topic.

Adding a few details Binns had always left out, things like maps and a taste of the political and social climate of the time to add context for a greater understanding of the issues and ideologies involved, and the Binns Goblin Wars Encyclopedia actually became a useful tool at that point. One valuable for its wealth of historical details (most of which had to be added to in order for the rest of it to make any sense).

Handing copies of the set of lecture notes off to a collection of out-of-work muggleborn Ravenclaws who had not yet emigrated to greener pastures, and hiring them to do the research and conversion project gave Harry a valuable resource without trying up his own time doing the work.

it also gave him a valuable aid for predicting goblin behavior in the upcoming wars, as the creatures were not terribly inventive. Cruel, yes. Cunning, sometimes. But if they always wanted the same kind of things (they did) and went after the same sort of targets (they did) and generally used tactics similar to what other goblins had before (they did, tradition was actually a very big deal to them on certain issues), then much of what they'd be doing in any given war could be predicted ahead of time by someone with that knowledge. And that gave a vital advantage to use against them.

Since he could just about count on the goblins to be against him in the wars that were approaching, Harry was very glad to have that reference forming.

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Dumbledore was getting too tired to be enraged.

The man absently pulled a bit of acromantula webbing out of his beard. It was barely stubble at this point. Hagrid, the poor fool, had been forced to shave him to get him down and out of the ropes made of his own hair.

At least he hadn't died this time, saved before the spiders could do more than nibble on him. Hagrid was naturally quite distressed. Dumbledore found himself hardly caring.

It was strange, how one could get used to dying so frequently in so many horrific ways. It continually surprised him how inventive his murderer was - and not just in killing him, but in attacking his power base.

For more than half a century he had been in complete control of the magical world. His mere suggestions could turn the tide of the community. Albus had literally been getting away with murder, and the power to do so had been handed to him on a platter, as it were, after his victory over his best friend Grindelwald. He had, during that time, been consolidating all wealth and influence under his own direct control.

Now, for the first time in fifty years, power was slipping away from him.

Albus dared not eat or drink or sit on anything without waving a unicorn horn amulet over it first to detect for all poisons - but notably on the watch for any more doses of malaclaw venom.

In the past few days he had focused his attentions (when not being slain) rather heavily on that vital substance, and at last had managed to corner the magical market on that toxin and buy up all the currently available supply, as well as newly produced stock. There was none to be had on the open market for any price, as he destroyed it almost as soon as he collected it.

The private sanctuary of his office had been robbed too frequently of late to trust a storage of this ingredient to accumulate anywhere! He did not wish to buy up vast sums of the venom, only for it then to be stolen and used on him!

And Albus was QUITE aware, thank you very much, that most of his present predicament was inescapable while he was under that venom's influence. The bad luck aura it created was too formidable to escape by mere chance, nor were his plans unaffected by the continual string of disasters it created.

Still, even though the tide had long ago turned against him, what else was he to do but try and stay ahead of things? So he managed as best he could in spite of the terrible unraveling of countless plots all around him.

If only this latest disaster had not been so serious.

His pet dark wizard had come to his office and explained how circumstances had combined to imperil his cover as Potions Professor at the school, and Albus was far from confident he could set these events straight given how much else he had of importance that was presently crowding his plate.

Severus finished his rant at last, and was clearly waiting for an answer as to how Dumbledore was going to fix this minor problem. Sadly, it truly was a small matter. He'd protected his man from many others like it before, none quite so serious or extreme as this, but between the political climate and so many other emergencies...

The old man sighed. "Perhaps... perhaps it would be for the best, Severus."

The Potion Master drilled him with an unfriendly glance. "What do you mean?"

Dumbledore gave off a weary groan, meeting his friend's gaze with a kindly one. "My influence is stretched to its limits already, my friend. I am under siege, and find I am attacked on so many fronts simultaneously that I have no safe haven in which to rally. It may be some time before I can set this situation to rights. So, perhaps, for a time, it might be better for you to pursue a mission for me while we wait for the unrest here to die down."

Snape raised his nose haughtily to stare down the length of it at the Headmaster, wordlessly demanding an explanation for why he was denying this trivial thing, always granted so easily before.

Realizing this was so, Dumbledore wearily explained, "Severus, I fear the American Dark Lord Colonel Sanders may have a broader power base than we even thought possible."

Uncomfortable with the change of topic, Severus drilled him with a steady gaze. "What is it, Headmaster?"

The old man sighed. "I fear he may have the backing of a true monarchy."

Snape sputtered indignantly, momentarily forgetting his own troubles. "But that's impossible! The Americans have no king. They cast off our sane rule to replace it with this blundering democracy of theirs."

Albus nodded gravely. "That is what we were led to believe, my friend. But you and I are both familiar with secrets, even secret governments unknown to those who are not a part of them. And I have been picking up disturbing hints of a 'King Burger' and 'Queen Dairy' in connection with this Colonel Sanders. Indeed, he may be just an officer in their army. Although, I suspect due to the nature of these attacks, he would be serving in their espionage services." The old man drew in a great and heavy breath, "Indeed, we must hope that this is so, for the alternative is terrifying."

"Headmaster?" Snape's voice betrayed unusual concern.

Albus nodded gravely. "I have many feelers out, and have begun to discover some startling rumors. Most of those who claim acquaintance with Colonel Sanders have also expressed familiarity with Captain Crunch and a General Motors. Severus, I fear we may indeed face an entire Dark Muggle army. And, if rumors I hear are true, they might have a base on our very doorstep, for I hear of connections between them and the McDonald clan of Scotland."

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Author's Notes:

Now THAT was just too fun not to do! There's just something so silly about someone taking the absurd so seriously.

Face it, you liked it too!

Chapter Forty-Seven

by Lionheart

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Dumbledore was not a happy headmaster. For one thing, this year had been a continual string of crises practically from the very first day. No, even before that. On the first day of September, where normally he had the full day until dinner to put the final touch of polish on things and set a last few schemes in motion, Harry had been in a disaster with a dementor, and things had been snowballing ever since.

Blasted boy hadn't even had the decency to die of it. But no, he'd had to be rescued just as the kiss was about to claim him. Then Dumbledore had been unable to avoid helping out when the brat somehow managed to live long enough, surviving the voyage to make it to Hogwarts. The event had been worth 'Legendary Headmaster' points in the eyes of students and staff, but it had still been terribly inconvenient of the boy not to perish. And Albus' 'too little, too late' strategy for saving Harry's life had been thwarted by Miss Lovegood bringing in that unicorn to help Fawkes cure him.

Then the Muggle Dark Lord had gotten involved, and the multiple deaths and destructions of his office had begun.

Of the two, he'd much prefer the destruction of his office cease. Dying was inconvenient, but no great chore, and an excellent way of delaying old age. If he used hairs from his sixty-year-old body to grow a new one for himself, what he got was his sixty-year-old self back. He'd then shave to have more sixty year old hairs. And, following the advice of his previous Headmasters, he'd then regrow the beard and color it so as to fit the 'kindly old gentleman' mold they'd had him shape for his public image.

However, as he stared at his much reduced wardrobe (his clothes having been destroyed several times, along with his office and personal quarters), trying to select an outfit for the day, a certain boundary was crossed and Dumbledore was not even aware of it.

For weeks now, ever since the disappearance of Trelawney and the first destruction of his office, Albus had been without certain control measures he'd once used on himself. Other priorities had always leapt higher to his mind and his comforting routine kept getting shoved further and further in the background as emergency after emergency demanded more of his attention.

Dumbledore was a monster, incapable of feeling pity, compassion or remorse, and he only kept his true self at bay by taking regular doses of a cocktail of potions including a special draught of cheering charms. It was because of this he was perfectly able to fake the image of a kindly grandfather.

However, those special lemon drops had been destroyed in the first fire, and Albus had not had time to replace them since. He'd been too busy to ask, and Snape too busy to fill that order in any case.

Dumbledore himself was too busy dealing with the explosion of emergencies to give the matter any thought. Indeed, his normal routine had been so disrupted that without the portraits of previous headmasters there to remind him that matter had entirely slipped his mind.

Exasperating this issue was the lack of drama coaching from those same portraits to reinforce his act. His reliance on these had been most extreme, and they had been gone for a while now.

Between the lack of dosed lemon drops, lack of current advice from those invaluable portraits, the destruction of multiple wardrobes combined with his natural dislike of the hideously colorful and expensive robes they made him wear (although, stealing money from Harry and other orphans to pay for them had done a lot to make him fonder of those colorful robes, in spite of hating the brightness of the offensive garments), Albus, in the stress of the moment, chose an old yet simple outfit for practical reasons, not thinking about the long term consequences, just concerned about something to wear.

It was a simple outfit, basic black with a top hat, cape and an old fashioned frock coat, the kind of thing people had been wearing, with perhaps a bit more color, during his youth. In his early years as a

man he'd often seen men dressed thus, and envied them their fine apparel and obvious prosperity. So it was with considerable spiritual relief that he slipped into a black waistcoat to finish off the ensemble.

This was what successful men wore.

Staring at his new self in the mirror, Albus then decided to shave off what ragged remnants were left after Hagrid chopped short his beard. Luckily his mustache had not been touched, so he left that alone, styling it as a long, pencil-thin handlebar mustache he dyed black and twirled - just as the dashing men out of his memories had done.

Dumbledore, due to bad luck, had forgotten to take his potions wrinkling his skin and whitening his hair after his latest revival. Sixty was quite young for a wizard, actually, equivalent to a muggle half his age. But, as he looked at himself so young and vital, Albus couldn't help but admire his reflection.

His hair was cropped short soon after to even out the damage Hagrid had done to his coiffeur, leaving him, though he did not know it, a picture-perfect stereotype archvillain of the early melodramas. A simple, straight up, black hat, tie-you-to-the-train-tracks, 'Soon-my-electro death ray-will-destroy-Metropolis!' kind of bad guy.

The odd thing was, it wasn't so much bad luck causing him to dress and act like Snidely Whiplash as the lack of advice from those portraits and the destruction of several sets of his regular garments. Dumbledore had always had this style of outfit lurking deep in the back of his closet, because this was the sort of clothing he'd always wanted to wear.

It spoke to his personality, and now he didn't have previous Headmasters and Headmistresses telling him not to.

The mandrake restorative had done much to correct the damage left over from a few failed revivals. However, though he was less of a melted wax figure of a man, Dumbledore still had a slight hunch to his back that had him leaning over. Still, he didn't give it any thought, constantly rubbing his hands together, enjoying the feel of his tight, youthful skin.

His face was still a bit pinched from leftover damage, giving him a bit of an odd, lopsided leer, but it wasn't worth dealing with at this time (this decision was MOST CERTAINLY a result of terribly Bad luck!) so Albus Dumbledore left his quarters to greet the day wearing standard villain attire from an era when tying maidens to railroad tracks was the norm, and muttering under his breath, "I hate the Colonel with his wee beady eyes!"

Sadly for Dumbledore, he was too preoccupied with his thoughts to notice that he was scaring muggleborn children in the halls as he passed them on his way to breakfast. He didn't even catch McGonagall's startled reaction when he took the Headmaster's chair, or the staff's muttering over his new look; one or two of them even discretely casting charms to confirm his identity.

No, he was wondering (not for the first time) if he could dispose of some of his enemies by preparing for them some sort of elaborate death trap - something slow so he could savor their fear as they met their demise.

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Harry received a book of personal grooming spells in the mail, partly because he wanted Dumbledore to still think he was watching what The Boy Who Lived learned, but also because he wanted to know them.

Some dark wizards, notably the Malfoy family, were big into personal hygiene. Most weren't, and Tom Riddle had learned only the basics.

Suddenly Hermione broke down crying, interrupting his reverie. When questioned why, she replied, "It just struck me, I'm never going to see my family again. Well, I suppose I could arrange to meet them somewhere magical. But, since they aren't magic and I am we'll be living in two different worlds now. Things will never be the same!" the bushy haired girl wailed.

Luna instantly hugged her, while making a dismissive shrug. "Pish tosh! You won't even notice anything is missing. We'll just have to arrange somethings."

"What things?" Hermione looked up from her despondency, somehow sure that when Luna said she had a good answer, she had it.

Luna lit up her face with a smile. "The right sort of illegal things. Our Ministry legislates more magic out of existence every year, but one of my cousins, a Commander Caratacus Pott, has exactly what you're looking for. Back in 1964 he invented the first magic car, perhaps you've heard of it? It is rather famous, you probably know its name: Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. It flies and transforms into a boat and does all sorts of wonderful things. He gave me a number of rides in it on our family vacations when I was a girl. Anyway, our Ministry responded by creating the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department and gradually passed a series of laws making it and anything like it illegal - it was Aunt Weasley who wrote the last of them, driving the final nail in the coffin of that branch of magic, in spite of him personally loving it. But Cousin Pott, when they started persecuting him, simply emigrated to America where they are much more free about those things. He started a business that's made him fabulously wealthy producing magical equivalents to most muggle devices. He invented the Wizarding Wireless Network, among other things. Even our Ministry, hypocritical fools the lot of them, import their specially enchanted Ministry cars from him - a man they drove out of business in England. I can just floo good Cousin Pott and he'll set your family up in fine style so you'll never need to fear popping by for a visit, and they won't notice much if any difference from the regular quality of their normal lives!"

Privately thinking about the odd sort of things most magicians considered 'normal', and about the Lovegood family in particular, Hermione and Harry both felt it quite likely they'd notice.

But, it was Hermione's family, after all. They loved her, and seeing as how they were willing to send her off to magical school for most of each year, it seemed likely they'd be willing to put up with a few oddities to have her back.

Also, say what you will about their lack of common sense, the magical world had the most amazing conveniences. Her family wouldn't suffer. In fact, though strangeness would increase, their quality of life could only improve.

"You'll want to set them up outside of England," Harry cautioned. "Maybe get them a place not far from Sirius. The Ministry here is going to get very anti-us the moment they figure out what we're doing, and we don't need them to have a convenient target with an already ready-made excuse to hurt them. I would much rather get your family out of the blast zone for this war, to be honest; and if it's anything like the last one, it's going to encompass all of Europe. But I can understand you'll want to keep them close."

"Funny," Hermione hiccuped, wiping away the evidence of her tears. "I recall signing up for a mission to save the fairy race from extinction. Nothing about saving the European magical world got mentioned."

Eyes still slightly red from her tears, Hermione gave Luna a grateful smile. "And you always seem to have the most interesting relatives. Tell me, how is it that the muggle world knows of so many of your relations?"

Luna shrugged. "We Lovegoods have always been closer to muggles than most wizards. It dates back to before the Battle of Hastings when so many different kingdoms dotted these isles, and we were royalty of one of them. In fact, our relationship to the fairy realm dates back to the same period, when a number of fairies came to the Christening of one of my ancestresses - Queen Aurora, although you probably know her as Sleeping Beauty. Anyway, being their rulers we naturally had to know about the muggle side of things, and that has led to many close links since. In fact, most of our squibs have gone on to become blacksmiths or engineers. We've had many technical family members because of it. Where do you think our printing press came from? The expertise to create such a thing doesn't appear out of nowhere."

Hermione couldn't help it and broke down in giggles, wondering, "Is there ANY fairy tale you don't have a relation to?" she laughed.

Luna's reply was completely serious. "None of the accurate ones."

The emergency dealt with, the trio all sat down for breakfast where they were presently staying at the Lovegood Home, having established it as one of their non-Normal Day locations. Apparently Luna's father thought nothing odd about her being home and at school at the same time, and had left to go printing while Luna served them all omelettes.

Harry started eating right away, but Hermione eyed hers carefully, judging calories. "How many eggs are in this omelette?"

"None," Luna remarked calmly.

Hermione raised her head in confusion. "So, you used an egg substitute then? I didn't know the magical world had any."

"Oh, no." Luna hurried to reassure. "It's all genuine egg."

"But you just said there weren't any," the bookworm protested.

"I'm so terribly sorry." The blonde's innocent face was a picture of remorse. "I didn't mean to confuse. You asked how many eggs, and the only number I know of less than one is none. None of us have a full egg. It was too big."

The brunette grumbled something about teaching her fractions, but then asked, "Did you expand one, then? You ought to know it isn't good to use those sorts of charms on food. It does bad things for your nutrition."

Luna felt she'd just been scolded about putting her panties on backwards. "Of course I know that, Hermione. I was magic-raised," she informed her good friend, a bit frostily.

Harry simply listened as he ate, content to let them argue if they wanted, as neither Harry nor Tom Riddle had much background in resolving fights - and he didn't want to use Tom's method of simply crushing all resistance.

Hermione felt a touch of chagrin. "So, it was a very large egg, then? You didn't use a dragon egg, did you?"

"No." Luna shook her head, taking another bite of omelette.

"What is it called, then?" the bookworm inquired, concerned about the health benefits of continuing to eat unknown food.

"Humpty Dumpty," Luna answered primly.

Hermione goggled at the news. Harry choked.

Luna went on to brightly explain, "He's a sucker for sitting on walls, and as you all know there is a sucker born every minute. Of course, a minute is a bit of an imprecise time measurement in Wonderland, where one might go on for weeks, or happen three times a second. But still that leaves us plenty of egg as he is constantly falling off those walls he's a sucker for sitting on. By now grandmother Alice has taught everyone to set a pan under him, so when all the king's horses and all the king's men are trying to put him back together again, they can start on his shell (which they never can finish) while we can be frying up the rest. We eat a lot of egg in Wonderland, but he is far too much for one person, so we tend to split him among whole dinner parties."

"And ALL of them are named Humpty Dumpty?" Hermione stressed, no longer sure if she should even be disbelieving of all of this anymore.

"Well, what else would you call an egg that sits on walls?" Luna asked, honestly confused. "We have to call him that. He insists! It wouldn't be proper not to, and the agreements are all with him, so if it weren't he, the king's horses wouldn't get their puzzle practice in."

"The king's horses?" Harry asked, his tone having gone a bit confused.

"The king's men have gone on to doing crosswords on his shell, since they never could get him assembled right. But the horses are still trying," Luna explained calmly in a way that made her sound quite

rational indeed. "Having hooves makes it a great deal more difficult, naturally. So we had to give them all suction-cups. They quite like them."

Harry hung his face into his palms. "If my sanity asks, I was never here."

"I'll put you on the list," Luna nodded brightly. "That's actually quite a common occurrence in Wonderland. So much so that people have taken to hiring sanities as door-to-door salesmen, so they can sell foot-powder and brushes while they look for people. But of course the people always hide."

The other two boggled. Luna had a way of behaving so rationally and reasonably about her occasional bouts of craziness that they made one wonder who was the one insane.

And, considering the fact that she could back up her observances with the occasional actual Cheshire Cat or Wonderland critter, perhaps she wasn't the loony one after all.

One had to consider: she'd grown up spending part of her youth in Wonderland. To her this was an actual place, filled with things so fantastic that a normal child was considered a mythical beast, and more than just a place, it was her grandmother's home. To her, this was not a work of fiction or historical nonsense, but a real world she'd been in, populated with people and creatures she knew, met with and played with.

The rules were different there, but so what? The rules at school were different from the rules at home, or at work. Different rules were nothing extraordinary. It's just, Wonderland did different better than most, and it had colored her perceptions of the rest of reality a bit.

Seeing their looks, Luna giggled, "I've heard of sanity, but I've never had much use for it. Too many crazy people practice it for my tastes!"

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Having granted the Weasley Twins Percy's prefect badge, his hair and a bit of polyjuice gave not just a moment's satisfaction, but an ongoing threat to the stability of Hogwarts castle that Dumbledore would have to deal with as not just one, but a continual string of emergencies.

Granting the Twins ideas like that was just terrible. For one thing, they obtained the list of things Snape had taken points away from other Houses for, and then went about the school taking those same number of points away from Slytherin students stating Those Same Reasons!

Taking twenty points away from Slytherin's top scoring student for "being an insufferable know-it-all" was only the beginning of this, and caused the girl no end of shock, outrage and indignation, flooring her parents at once.

On the surface of it this was petty revenge. Deeper down this was probably the most successful protest ever made against that teacher's actions, as any attempt to examine this 'unfair treatment' ran into the uncrossable wall that was Snape's precedent of having done the exact same thing for those same reasons and gone on going it without reprimand for years.

So, either this was perfectly acceptable (which it wasn't) or... well, you couldn't punish the student for doing as the professor did until or unless you'd punished the professor himself for setting that bad an example.

It created a legal hemorrhage in Hogwarts, as there was no way the pureblood elites in Slytherin were going to put up with the same abuse and punishments they'd heaped on everyone else - but they couldn't stop it so long as Snape was protected for still doing those same things.

Either it was acceptable, or it wasn't. And now it was coming back to face the purebloods that if this was fair to do to some people, it was fair to do it to anyone - including their own children.

They couldn't be openly unfair - too much. Everything they did with prejudice at its base had to have some other kind of polite covering over it, and this one did have that right up until it got used against them. Now they faced the choice of ripping that cover off and exposing the unfairness so they could eliminate it (which would cost them their rights to do it to others in this particular fashion) or leave it and ignore it and let it hurt their children.

Either choice was completely unacceptable to purebloods, and they'd blame Dumbledore for putting them in this position or not having resolved it earlier.

That could cost him clout and political capital in a way that him getting away with murder behind closed doors didn't. Not even the great blow up with France over his outright act of war upset his power base to this extreme - all from a bit of prank by two Weasleys.

And the Twins weren't even remotely done causing trouble yet.

It all having been done using Percy's face and badge, though, was going to cause the insufferable prat no end of trouble himself, and the brown-nosing sycophant was going to be receiving hell from Dumbledore soon.

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Hogwarts collected ancient magic items like the Louvre collected art. This included countless old books, libraries of previous headmasters and staff who'd died without heirs (rather a lot of them, really), or outsiders who left their belongings 'To Hogwarts'. Anything too precious to integrate into the general collection wound up down in the vaults. Sometimes collections got neglected just because the custodian didn't have the time to look them over and include them, so forgotten collections accumulated over the years.

Filch, the caretaker, hadn't looked even once at that mess since he got the job. Looking at old relics reminding him of the magic he couldn't use hadn't interested him in the slightest.

That stuff had been building up for a millennia and had recently been added to in prodigious amounts by the Headmaster concealing thefts of goods from magical families getting extinguished in the last two wars. Only it had all been stolen away by Luna's cards (one of whom was the Knave of Hearts, who was really rather gifted at stealing, actually).

The amazing Lionskin of Hercules was among them - and it was a ragged mess, having been worn by countless wizards, villains and would-be heroes through thousands of magical battles. The skin was never as invulnerable as muggle tales made it seem, so it was chewed to ribbons and subject to countless stains across the millennia. Although, that the scrap of nearly hairless leather had survived at all through that period of intense wear and tear spoke a magnificent testimony for just how durable it really was.

Hermione stumbled across it opening a box, lifting out the ragged wad of leather confetti and wrinkling her nose at it before dropping what looked to be bits of shredded cleaning rag horribly stained beyond recognition back into the container, and picking up a card that was in the box with it.

When she'd read what it said she fainted.

Harry and Luna both looked over her to make sure she was alright, found the card and read it, then smiled wickedly to each other.

"Do you think?" Luna asked, letting the substance hang.

"Hermione did it in our second year, using hairs from Millicent's cat." Harry replied with his own smirk firmly in place. "It stuck her halfway, though."

"We are fey, power is innate within us and transformation is one of our most distinct gifts. I'm sure we could complete the change. We've got the energy to do that and turn back," she replied.

"I'll order some more polyjuice. This is just too good to miss," Harry grinned.

Luna lofted an eyebrow. "None of your own?"

"Still mixing. Those stewed lacewing flies take twenty eight days, and I'm not even close. We'd be forced to wait almost a month for my own batch."

"It might be better," the blonde nodded. "We shall see."

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Author's Notes:

Yes, they have just launched an ambitious project that, they hope, will land with them being lion animagi - Nemean Lions, specifically, which I know has not been done before. Not invulnerable, but certainly tougher than your average bear.

Chapter Forty-Eight by Lionheart

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There was much more to be done on the houses they were building than even Harry had supposed. It was Hermione's idea to expand their application of the charms used on the ceiling of the Great Hall to not just the atrium dome, but to most of the outer walls as well, so people within could see out without adding in vulnerable areas like easily breakable windows.

The ceiling of the Great Hall of Hogwarts was enchanted so those inside could see the sky outside. But, as Harry knew from flying over the castle a few times, if you were outside the Great Hall, those same charms didn't let you see in. From outside the castle that roof looked solid, but people in the Great Hall could see someone on a broom flying overhead.

That made Hermione's application perfect.

A person sneaking up on a house generally watches out for those places he knows a person could see him through and takes care to avoid them. But, if the ENTIRE exterior wall could be seen through from within but not without?

A burglar or attacker could never tell when someone might be looking at him.

Besides, it was generally nicer for those who dwelt within, as well. Who didn't enjoy having broad windows looking out over beautiful landscaped yards? And watching snow fall was always beautiful - especially when you weren't cold.

They could even add to those charms ones similar to the ones on Moody's eye or Amelia Bone's monocle: the ability to detect invisible or disillusioned people - even highlighting those for special attention. So you'd know at a glance that someone invisible was sneaking across your lawn. So the very act of being invisible made you MORE noticeable and more likely to get a response.

A response along the lines of: "There he is! Blast him!"

There was no need to add the additional spells from Moody's eye. Residents of houses had no particular need to see through each other's walls, or the clothes of passersby. So seeing through solid objects was something they could leave off, and be glad for the lack of. Privacy existed for a purpose. So they wouldn't be an infinite free peep show on everyone in town, but they would warn you quite effectively of someone sneaking across your lawn.

"We should put vaults in the basement too," Hermione further suggested. "They'd probably be more secure than Gringotts, because no matter how secure people like to think Gringotts might be, the goblins must be able to access the vaults there to perform transfers, or to get gold out for fees, interest they are due, or so on. And, if the goblins can get at your money, there is no telling what all they could do if they decided to."

"Which they would, and DO, in all of their little uprisings and wars," Luna confirmed. "They steal out of every vault they feel they can get away with."

Hermione nodded, accepting the confirmation. "You wouldn't have to store everything there. But, to use a muggle comparison, you could say having a vault in your home is more like a checking account. You can get to the gold quickly and easily, even if it doesn't gain interest and is a little less secure than, say, banking with the gnomes in Zurich. It wouldn't have to affect any of your long term investments at all, just be a petty cash fund so you didn't have to go to Switzerland every time you wanted your hair done. It would fill the gap between what you carry around in your pockets, and what you don't need ready access to on any kind of routine basis."

"And there are plenty of families, the Weasleys for example, who haven't got enough gold to justify the expense of maintaining a large bank account." Luna eagerly agreed.

The two muggle-raised looked at her.

Luna was unruffled as she shrugged. "They may only charge two percent, but the larger your deposits, the more that two percent is."

"Uhm, Luna? Muggle banks GIVE you interest to bank there. They don't charge it," Hermione spoke in sort of dumbfounded tones.

The blonde witch perked up immediately, clasping her hands together in delight. "Oh! We should bank with them instead, then!"

"I agree," Harry posited quickly. "But moving on..."

"Most people don't have vaults in their homes because a vault in an insecure building is an unsecured vault, and most houses are extremely low security," Hermione blurted, cutting him off. "But, from the very start the intention of these homes was to be secure buildings. And whatever vaults we put there ought to be MORE secure than Gringotts because that security will change; it's up to the individuals, so there will be a great degree of variation, and it's always the traps they DON'T suspect that catch criminals!"

Harry scratched his head, agreeing with her, "And, we could always put the Weasley Twins into business as Vault Protection consultants, this time using those prankster minds of theirs to lay series of bizarre traps. Or to figure out how to break in to assess holes in a vault's security."

"They'd do well," Luna agreed.

Harry adjusted his glasses, and couldn't fight a grin. "You know, it seems every time our conversation turns to 'Get the twins to test the security' it's something to our benefit." He grew serious for a moment. "But, you know there is another bonus to having vaults in all of the houses, even if people never use them."

"Oh?" both girls turned curious glances to him.

"Uh huh," He nodded. "Because..."

"People will KNOW they have them!" Hermione blurted, once again getting excited as her mind raced ahead of Harry's words.

Shimmering with her idea, she twirled about to explain it to Luna. "Most of the success Death Eaters had in the last war was the speed of their raids - they were always gone before reinforcements or help could arrive."

"But if there is a vault in the basement," Luna realized, the idea dawning.

"They'll stay and break it open, even if there's nothing in it. They couldn't know the contents beforehand because there isn't a goblin to bribe to give them a balance sheet!" Hermione exclaimed.

Harry nodded, confirming all her statements. "Yes. Tom's followers are split almost equally between the very top and bottom most levels of society, and ironically both ends are quite greedy for more gold. Once they know that our houses have vaults they'll have a difficult question each time they break into one: Do they go upstairs to kill the family, or down to grab the gold?"

"Both should have substantial defenses," Luna posited.

"Right!" Hermione declared, before rushing onwards, "In the last war it took the Death Eaters very little time to break into a house, kill the family, then escape. Most of the time warning never got to the aurors, who were so disorganized they almost never arrived in time even when it did."

"The work of Lucius and his ilk," Harry supplied.

"Thank you," Hermione accepted his tidbit, before rushing ahead once again, "Carving through defenses ALWAYS takes more time than rushing across a living room! So already to take out these houses we are NOT talking about quick raids! But, if they have to decide to go up to kill the family or down to steal their gold..."

"Some of the time they'll steal the gold," Harry interjected.

"And they'll NEVER have time to do both if we have a reaction force on hand! Heck, they shouldn't ever succeed at either one, but, if you had to choose..."

"Would you rather lose your family or your gold?" Luna saw ahead and completed Hermione's question, before answering it with a smile. "I can always earn more gold. But replacing a family just isn't the same."

"No, it isn't." Hermione stopped her feverish rush to explain with a smile.

"They are sure to try and compensate with larger assaults, using separate teams to go after the family and their gold; but the larger a force the longer it takes to organize and the slower it moves." Harry instructed. "The small, quick groups of the last war were perfect for their goals. If they want to double the size of those to have enough people to kill a family and raid their vault at the same time they'll discover their reactions are clumsier, and the whole force harder to coordinate. So they'll move slower regardless."

"In theory they could train to overcome some of that weakness," Hermione postulated. "Muggles do. But there is a limit to what training can do for you."

"And that training requires great discipline - which is something no wizard has ever had in large amounts, and dark ones less than most," Harry grinned. "No, the larger a force of dark wizards you gather together, the more they resemble the keystone cops. The ideal force for their purposes is three to four people per strike force, any more and they start bickering."

"Evil has always been its own worst opponent," Luna smiled dreamily.

Harry nodded, speaking from experience, having access to Voldemort's memories gave him countless such examples, "Every dark witch or wizard is concerned about him or herself first and foremost. They each want all the glory and goodies, while getting none of the blame (and as little of the actual work as possible); and the games they play to do that are literally infinite - they occupy their Entire Lives, from getting sorted into Slytherin onward. Each one tries to pull down his fellows while aggrandizing himself. Putting aside their own interests for the good of the team is literally anathema to all

they've ever striven for. Herding cats would be a breeze by comparison."

"How did Voldemort ever do it?" Hermione questioned.

Harry sighed, taking a seat and motioning for them to sit also. "It's a long story. In summary, Tom Riddle was always a bright yet selfish child - the exact opposite of me. I was content to be meek and dumb. He was cruel and bullied those around him, I was the one who got bullied. My relatives beat and brutalized me, constantly putting me down in every way imaginable and not letting me alone for an instant. He, on the other hand, got away with anything because the overworked orphanage employees mostly ignored the kids. So long as he could keep things quiet, they never noticed what he did, so he had a completely free hand to terrorize those around him. You couldn't ask for a more different environment from the one where the Dursleys watched my every move like a hawk and brutally punished the least disobedience. He had freedom of action, while I was raised in a jail serving hard labor."

Hermione paled as he described his experience at the Dursleys. She'd often suspected it was bad, but this went beyond the pall.

Harry continued, "Our backgrounds could not have been any more different. The Dursleys neglected and abused me, belittled and humiliated me, insulted me, starved me, beat me, vilified me, dehumanized me to everyone, and made me their personal slave. Young Tom Riddle, on the other hand, made himself master of all he surveyed right under the nose of authority figures who didn't notice his little games - and that was a pattern he expected to go on throughout his life. Which, strictly speaking, it did. The Ministry's actions (aided by a few of his agents inside it sowing disorder and confusion) were so bumbling and incompetent they were effectively useless; while Dumbledore, for his own reasons, let him get away with most of what he wanted to do. All of that lasted right up until I reflected his killing curse back on him - the end of his natural life. So, strictly speaking, he enjoyed that privileged state of being ignored by authority his whole life long - and I've never been free of scrutiny. I was under Dumbledore's watchful eye from before I was born."

Harry wiped tired eyes with his hands. "Even our experiences at Hogwarts are almost in direct opposition to each other. I arrived here well known and loved. But starting with being revealed as a Parselmouth my reputation went south and I started to become hated and vilified. Tom Riddle arrived here as an unknown muggleborn and hated. He was forced to become a toady to more powerful older students to survive after being sorted into Slytherin. However just as my reputation reversed, so did his over time. Ironically, being shown as a Parselmouth was the turning point for both of us, only it was the best thing ever to happen to him. I got befriended by Ron, who made sure I stayed lazy and never studied. Tom made no friends, just allies of convenience, and worked hard, driven to improve his situation."

The tired boy sighed and leaned back, contemplating the morning sky. "Tom was brilliant. He saw he could turn the tables on those he toadied to if he could get more powerful than they were - and he did. It took time. He built his spellcasting ability up fanatically, making himself the most useful follower in the whole House. By doing so he was able to trade his services for greater and greater favors, changing patrons in exchange for bribes and bits of advantage until finally he didn't need a sponsor anymore, he'd already gotten enough from ignorant purebloods to stand on his own if he wanted. But he went on doing as he'd done previously, collecting more and more favors, and more and more resources, until he was a leader in his House and most of his former patrons were now his followers. He'd played them all off against each other until, in the end, he was the only one holding any cards. By then they were forced to accept his stories about being a pureblood 'wrongfully cast off' by the family over a perceived wrong, as it hurt their egos too much to be that deeply in thrall to a halfblood."

Harry scowled at himself. "While I, until this year anyway, squandered any esteem in which I was held, trying so hard to 'fit in' that I could not have done any more damage to my reputation if I'd done it deliberately. My being scared of people drove off any potential allies, and kept me isolated, so any power blocks that were forming didn't have me in them. So now, in the space of two short years, I've gone from most popular person in the wizarding world to an isolated hermit with only two friends. A mighty reversal indeed, and just exactly the opposite of what happened to Riddle."

"We are working to reverse that," Hermione offered kindly, hoping to comfort the boy who'd always been her first and only friend. "What you did with the sword of Gryffindor and other artifacts of the Founders was very brave, and people started to see you in a new light - as a hero again."

Harry chuckled. "That was the point in using them that way." He pulled the sword partway out of where he'd hidden it. "Pity that we forgot about it for that fairy ritual. It's just not the same without the gems."

"The spirit of them is still in the magic of those devices," Luna spoke, confusing them both.

"Now, speaking to a reaction force," Hermione quickly changed the subject to prevent Harry from dwelling on his failures again.

"Yes," Harry accepted this change with a nod, leaning forward to clasp his hands together while he spoke. "So far all we've been working on are passive defenses, which are far from perfect. Still, you don't throw out the entire concept of tanks just because tanks aren't invulnerable. You don't throw out the entire concept of body armor just because there are things that can penetrate it. And martial artists still spend a lot of time learning how to block things, even though blocks aren't perfect either."

Harry caught them in his gaze, but his grin was sparkling, "Don't demand perfection because nothing is ever perfect. Going that route only condemns you to being eternally unsatisfied with everything around you. Defenses are the start. Everyone's got to have a safe place to base themselves out of. It's when your enemy hits your rear that the real agony starts - and there is nothing Voldemort or Dumbledore are more inclined to do to us. So we've got to sew up our town as tight as we can, because they'll both hit it."

"Is it really paranoia if they truly are out to get you?" Hermione asked with a grin.

"Of course I'm paranoid. But am I paranoid ENOUGH?" Harry asked, with a smile on his face.

Luna nodded. "Yes. Now, one of the first things we'll want to establish is a covenant community, where people swear oaths to abide by certain terms as a condition of living there. You don't want to live those terms? Go elsewhere. No one is forcing you to move here. You are welcome to make whatever rules you want to someplace else. Here, we live by these."

Harry nodded, understanding her point. "Oaths like: Don't be a Death Eater, and equivalents."

"Exactly," Luna agreed, just as the light of understanding shone in Hermione's eyes. "Our terms would be some basic Centaur principles: Number one, your safety is your own responsibility. Trusting someone else to guard your life makes you no better than a slave. Likewise, the safety of a community is the responsibility of that whole community. If any decide they will not defend themselves, they are to be left without defense by others. If they are unwilling to work or risk to be safe, they are unworthy of the privilege of enjoying security and are cast out of the town. In order to help keep this stricture, all adult residents will be required to reach and maintain an acceptable standard of fighting ability."

"Oh, that would be PERFECT!" Hermione squealed, bouncing up, getting excited by this prospect. "That would change the whole paradigm from one family cowering in their home waiting for the enemy to break through and kill them, to a couple of adult magicians firing out of their bunker while hundreds more of their armed neighbors race to assist them! The whole war would change! They could never attack Godric's Hollow under the old rules because it would be, not one little raid, but assaulting an armed camp!"

"Isn't that a bit much to ask?" Harry asked, feeling dubious of the ability of normal wizards to live up to such a standard.

"No. Not actually." Hermione blurted out in her excitement. "There are tons of countries that require military service of all their residents, and enroll them in their reserves after their term of enlistment is up. This

is the same thing, just on a city instead of country wide scale. But considering all of these people have, theoretically, already HAD an education on how to defend against the dark arts..."

The bookworm practically quivered in her glee. "We could turn Godric's Hollow into the magical equivalent of Switzerland! Armed neutrality. 'We don't care what Dark Lord you worship, just leave us alone.' It would require massive fortification and a trained population, but if we are going that way anyway..."

The bushy haired girl looked so happy about the prospect that Harry felt terrible about bursting her bubble. "Yes, I have to agree with what you're saying. But, considering the lazy fools that make up the wizarding populace, that sounds an awful lot like trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

"Why should that be difficult?" Luna interrupted, blinking in confusion.

Harry caught himself. "Oh. Right. Sorry, muggle expression. They can't do transfiguration."

"Ah!" The blonde nodded, satisfied she understood. "Well, yes, I can see how they could find that difficult, then."

"Nonsense!" Hermione rebutted the original objection. "Every witch or wizard is already armed with a deadly weapon and theoretically trained to use it. If they made any effort at all to fight back against the various Dark Lords they would be losing followers left and right. Even if Tom only lost one every raid in three he'd soon run out of followers. Then HE'D be the one terrified and running scared! Strong as he may be, the man's still gotta sleep. And he isn't blocking fifty spells at once. We may be individually weaker, but there's a reason people fear army ants!"

The brown-haired girl frowned, disapprovingly, and whispered, "Also, there is something utterly contemptible about grown men with full educations and the attitude, the strange dare of telling a child, 'Well, I am not going to bother to defend myself. So if you don't want me to die you'd better save my life!'"

Luna beamed approval to her. "Yes, so before even moving in, we tell them: These are our terms. Don't like them? Fine. Go live elsewhere. If you want to live here, you agree to abide by our conditions - just like the rent charged for the privilege of living in any other place you don't own."

Hermione bounced with her own example, "Or, how a man with an apartment complex can tell his renters: no pets, no loud parties! We can tell them: Don't be Death Eaters, live according to a certain standard of conduct. Home owners associations get away with worse restrictions!"

Harry conceded they could do that. Wizards had a very medieval outlook and a very medieval society. They were used to things like the local noble owning all the property and setting conditions on its use. To them this was normal, just like it was normal to modern muggles to have mortgage payments to make to a bank.

Actually, by comparison, the medieval serfs got off easy, as their rents were less of their income, by comparison, than the mortgage payments were out of the modern wage.

And it would allow them to control who got to live there, throwing out those that failed to agree or refused to abide by the restrictions, restrictions that were mutually agreed upon and put there for everyone's protection.

"And, having that rule 'don't be a Death Eater' implies strongly we have the right to check," Harry conceded, lifting his eyes to meet the twin gazes of his friends. "And it would be in our best interests to do so frequently. Heck, we could censure someone for spouting their propaganda!"

Hermione nodded vigorously. "Like Draco. No one has any doubt about where his loyalties lie. Honestly, spouting death eater propaganda in the midst of a supposed 'light' school? Real teachers would have expelled him the first time he crowed that 'and the mudbloods are next' junk in second year."

Harry found himself agreeing, and contrasting that with Tom's memories. "Yeah. Lucius had some brains, but Draco has none." He sighed as in mock sadness. "The quality of Death Eaters has really declined since Tom stopped training them personally. Even the best of them fight as individuals without any real teamwork. Most of them rely on fear and the Unforgivables to get through a fight, covering up the fact they are incompetent wizards by using spells that have no block or counter. A man can only dodge so much, and a single hit is enough to take him out with any of those curses."

The boy hero sat up decisively. "Okay, Vulturewart devised some wards that allowed anyone with a Dark Mark to pass, and ONLY those with a Dark Mark to pass. Or, if they are like myself and know that mark's inner secrets, which, before you ask, I'll naturally teach to you the moment you have the proper background in runes and arithmancy to understand them," Harry cut off the dual interruptions made by the eager-to-learn girls.

He grinned widely as they settled down. "But, give me a little time and those should be easy enough to reverse to create a ward that will simply keep out anyone who has a Dark Mark, and ONLY those with one!"

Hermione giggled. "We should start selling those around Diagon Alley."

"Too soon," Luna corrected. "It would tip our hand too early, during an era where people carrying the mark are still claiming to be innocents, and would raise a fuss over being kept out. But yes, someday we definitely should."

"But if we put them up around our town," Harry smiled triumphantly. "Then whatever Vulturewart's followers want to do to us, they'll have to do it from long distance, robbing them of direct access and that personal touch."

"I like that," Hermione agreed. "He's got these working for him. We should definitely turn them against him."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Plus, I'm pretty sure that I can finagle it right so as to make our wards unalterable by anyone who possesses a Dark Mark. It's just a reflection of the wards used to restrain certain magical creatures: set it so that a certain frequency, ie the magic to be contained, is blocked from access to the magical flow of the wards so they can't control them, then make that frequency match the one supplied by the Mark. You could set wards against a certain person that way, but most people don't bother." He smacked his lips thoughtfully. "But I think I will against both Tom and Albus."

Both girls giggled ferociously.

Harry shrugged, rising up and putting his arms around both girls. "It won't stop them. Both our enemies are accustomed to working through agents, the Master Manipulator especially. But in Tom's case we can force him to work through the agents of his agents; while Dumbledore is far and away the most potent person on his side. None of his tools are anywhere near as effective as Tom's at this sort of thing, so in situations like this one he prefers to act personally. In both cases we're forcing them to use non-preferred tools, and that sort of thing leads to errors."

"Errors which we can then exploit," Hermione affirmed firmly.

"Both are also accustomed to subversion," Luna observed, "either turning a few people on site into their servants, or infiltrating their own. Often both strategies are used at once. But if we can deprive them of the ability to do that by setting up rules and precautions beforehand to prevent it, then we deprive both Dark Lords one of their most frequently used and vital tools."

"I like it," Harry agreed.

"Especially for use against an information junkie like Albus," Hermione agreed enthusiastically. "If he can't get any local information through any of the usual sources, then he'll be much more reluctant to act against us. People like that both hate and fear the unknown, so the longer we can keep him in the dark about our town, our plans, and our defenses, the longer we'll hold."

"And that grants us time for building up to hopefully neutralize him," Harry agreed. Then he sighed. "The weird thing is, we don't even plan to live there. Godric's Hollow is our red flag to wave in front of those two bulls. Our real treasures will be elsewhere, hopefully in unaligned countries. This is just a place to give those who don't flee England a place to run to, and a target for our opponents to waste their strength against; a diversion, if you will."

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Author's Notes:

I get so tired of those 'oh! everything about Harry and Tom's childhood was identical' stories, when, if you actually look at the facts presented, they aren't even similar. In fact, as this rant presents, they could hardly be more different!

People assume Tom was abused at the orphanage, when the only data we are given in the books reveals him as the abuser of his fellows there. That is NOT the same!! Harry was bullied. Tom WAS THE bully!

Chapter Forty-Nine

by Lionheart

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Gilderoy Lockhart proved his worth once again. The man had a fan club who genuinely believed the man was some sort of great hero. They loved him. More important, they TRUSTED him! They believed him and believed IN him! They were, in a word, loyal to the man.

It was time for the trio to start making use of that.

Through him, they invited a large number of witches and wizards to parties, a meet and greet situation for his fan club. This was normal. Only in this case they would be having Frank and Alice Longbottom there to conduct private, secret interviews. At these parties Lockhart would invite a few persons aside at a time privately to share a cup of tea (laced on their end with veritaserum) and blending in as part of the conversation the aurors would be asking certain questions, determining if this was the sort of person they wanted in the new town, obviating those they didn't.

Those people selected would be offered a chance to move to Godric's Hollow, even provided a short explanation for why Lockhart personally endorsed the town, why he felt it was needed, and with very reasonable terms for moving and then living there. Even jobs would be offered where appropriate.

Those who declined for whatever reason could, again, be obliviated so they did not go sharing details before they were ready to spread.

They could, using this method, select the best out of what was available in his fan club in Britain. Which, considering how popular the man was, should easily be enough to fill up the four hundred homes Harry expected to build.

It would just take months to do all this sifting; although they did offer the very attractive (to his fans) incentive that Lockhart himself would have a residence in this town. What made this especially appealing was that he could offer, by living there, a certain shadow of protection

- just like Dumbledore cast over Hogwarts. He's there, so it must be safe! Right?

They'd have to work that man HARD so he didn't spoil his image when the time came, just because they couldn't afford that illusion to be shattered.

Getting all the moving and shuffling done secretly would be the hard part, but there they had another advantage in that Lockhart's fans were generally not the type who fell into either Dark Lord's groups of followers. Both Albus and Tom primarily targeted those who had influence and power. The purebloods personified both, and were not particularly interested in a halfblood hero. So Lockhart's followers were generally solid members of the working class, and nobody could ask for a better type to create a town out of.

For added incentive, and to excuse all the secrecy with which this was being conducted, Harry authorized his people to reveal that Harry himself would be taking up residence in this town, partly for the same reasons they were.

All the magical world knew that Harry had been kept under utmost secrecy virtually his entire life. They also generally knew of the recent scandals over how horribly he'd been treated, so a move for him seemed only natural, and what better place than to a magic community where magical people could look over and care for him, rather than those beastly Dursleys?

No, once things were explained in those terms people could accept the need for secrecy at once. They were privileged, being let in on one of the great secrets of their time. Lockhart was personally taking over care of the boy hero in the town where his parents had dwelt, and they were being trusted to assist him, becoming the neighbors and community the boy needed.

This would, in most English witches or wizards, ignite the fires of fanaticism.

That was good. Channeled correctly it could carry them a long way, and make most of the restrictions they insisted on seem that much

more reasonable. "You want to check my arm every month for a Dark Mark? Well, of COURSE! You should do that to EVERY person who enters the town where Harry lives!"

No, the combination of Harry and Lockhart was worth so much more than just the front page of a newspaper. Thick wards and paranoid security were seen in a very favorable light given those circumstances. No one knew what sort of remnants of dark followers were still out there, but everyone just accepted that Harry needed protecting (because he'd always been protected, on the word of some very trustworthy people), so a thickly defended town for him to grow up in seemed downright reasonable! Even NECESSARY!

And it was not just security they would be dealing with. Harry intended to compensate the residents for all the secrecy and danger by making Godric's Hollow an ideal magical community, adding parks, libraries, their own hospital, the works. This would be a covenant community where people swore oaths to inhabit it, and breaking those meant expulsion. Town residents would even be involved in a 'neighborhood watch' program, along with a mutual defense pact and effectual training. So it seemed fair to compensate with extra perks.

They would even build their own school. Hermione suggested they call it an adult education center, or something more devious like a gym, where adults could pick up training they'd missed the first time - like how to cast a decent shield, and so on, or kids could get an early start. Luna suggested they make it like a club that only community members could join. That sounded not only reasonable, but made it a privilege, so they went with that.

Gilderoy's tutors would be among the first teachers.

Harry altered and expanded the town plans to put several manors around the perimeter so they would have wide, protected grounds sheltering the rest of the community. From the outside they would start with an outer ring of manors, like the Bones or Potter manors that each required a lot of grounds, then a ring of farms to feed the community, then a hard nugget of houses in which most of the people would live, and at the very center a small castle to house most of the

public resources, like the school, library and hospital. And the castle could also house a chapel, and thus have their church bells.

The fun thing was each layer could then be protected by its own distinct set of wards, different from the others in subtle yet important ways.

Harry had put up wards equal to what Tom Riddle could do. It was difficult to bypass those, as they were generally quite good. However, the trouble with that was that Tom, along with a selection of his more skilled followers, were among those who could get through them. They knew that style, and how to predict the traps and cracks through those defenses. So even if he stopped Tom himself or marked Death Eaters from accessing the flows to disrupt them, they still had the key and knowing the style could easily teach someone else to open the wards up for them.

A person like Bill Weasley under Imperious would be ideal.

Ideally, the trio would be able to add another layer of wards around Godric's Hollow so there would be a layer those enemies couldn't easily anticipate. How to find a person to do quality warding was a good question, however.

Goblin wards were out. The problem with goblin made wards was that goblins could always bypass them, and would do so the first instant they felt like it. They'd even hire out for the right price and bring down those wards for less than the price paid to create them. And worse, goblin made wards were always built to take down not only themselves, but any other wards you had connected to them when they fell. So if the goblins sold you out, you were defenseless - and they WOULD sell you out to the highest bidder, first chance they got. They'd done it before, during the last war.

Goblin wards were set primarily for goblin purposes, and those purposes did not always include protection of the people on the property being warded. In fact, they rarely did, and not for long even in those cases.

So goblin wards were out, as were any set by goblin employees, for those same reasons. Those employees often didn't even know why their employers would insist on having certain wards sets worked into the network, they just did as they were told.

The other great ward caster of their time, Albus Dumbledore, was also completely unacceptable. Even if they could get his cooperation, he'd subvert the ward schemes toward his own purposes for those same reasons. And he'd never let one of his own wards keep him out.

The Ministry had their own ward experts on call, but those people were just running their own businesses and were no more trustworthy than any other salesman or contractor, which was to say not much. Even in rare cases when they could not be bribed, threatened, deceived or forced to give up the ward secrets, their minds could always be read for them, and both Albus and Tom had people who could do that, quite easily and thoroughly too.

No, the BEST way to do it would be to train up a few ward experts who could then be induced to live in the town they protected. And that was, perhaps surprisingly, fairly simple to do. All they really had to do was catch a few recent graduates of Hogwarts who'd failed to get the jobs they'd expected before the poor halfbloods or muggleborns emigrated to greener pastures in other countries. Pay for their training, and you had the right people. They could, and would, find Healers for the hospital and other specialists for their secured village the same way.

Only trouble was, it would take a few years for them to be really good at it.

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Fred and George Weasley's response revealed they would've been motivated even without the money, "Really? You mean we get to break into people's houses to prank them, and they're OKAY with this?!?"

"Actually, they'll PAY you for this," Hermione responded with a wry smirk. "Through us, anyway. Part of their rents will be going to fund

this, to teach these people to use their homes' security features. Five galleons per house invaded where you prank the occupants."

Jaws dropped, then eyes sparkled. Malicious grins formed.

They'd have done it without the money. But, of course, the money made them downright fanatics. The twins had a prank business to build, and that wasn't cheap, even with access to school supplies.

Very quickly, the Fey Trio became VERY busy on 'Normal Days' mixing up prank items for the twins to use in anticipation of the town being ready.

Dwarven stonemasons worked fast, building about as quickly as humans did with wood; and that meant large teams, highly motivated (which they were) could throw up Harry's villas, even with all of the features he demanded, in about three days apiece. Since they had a surprisingly large unemployed population of dwarves they could afford to have several teams working at once, making perhaps twenty of those villas at once.

Godric's Hollow began to take shape very quickly, added structures and all. The dwarves informed Harry they expected the bulk of his village to be ready for habitation in two months, and they'd like payment promptly at that time, thank you very much.

Since the castle would probably take that much time by itself, Harry had no problems paying those workers early, at the halfway point for the entire job. It wasn't like they wouldn't have earned it, and he could understand why they would want to get to work building their own lives up again quickly. Besides, it wasn't like the played-out mine he was offering had cost him anything. He'd gladly give them another to finish the job, if that was what they wanted.

But the reason the dwarves were working so fast was in their eagerness to get a home, and that was certainly something he could understand.

The first of Lockhart's fan-greet parties would be held after the first week of construction, and the move-in's started the week after. The

twins could not be restrained, in their eagerness, and would be pranking soon after that.

And, of course as might be expected, the people who lived in Godric's Hollow soon became equally motivated to keep them OUT.

Not long after they started, certain conversations could be heard in the pub Harry owned in town. of which the following would be a sadly typical example:

"Ok, that was really tiresome," one wizard grouched. "I smelled like limberger cheese for two weeks. Next time, I'm actually going to check the Foe Glass."

"Limberger?" his companion scoffed. "Why that's nothing! My bottom was a glowing green that could be seen right through my robes. I couldn't step foot outside for fear of flashing the neighbors."

"Oh, so you think YOU'VE had it hard?" one wizard with elephant tusks asked as he used his long snout to pick up his glass. "They hit me with a new one yesterday, and this silly elephant curse hadn't worn off yet!"

"What was the new one?" his drinking companions inquired.

The man suddenly blushed. "Never you mind. I've got business at home I ought to be attending to."

As the man stood up to leave, they could see his pants were soaking wet and immediately recognized the distinct smell of an incontinence curse.

"Almost worse than the Death Eaters, those two," the wizards turned back to their drinks, muttering unhappily.

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Amelia Bones was nobody's fool.

Recent events had also caused her to reexamine things in her life and world more closely. Back in the Ministry there was a new administration, and a new Minister, but it was hard not to think of him as the Second Coming of Fudge. Same errors, same incompetence, different face.

Dumbledore was still very much the man in charge, and being aware that the head of their government was a traitor to their people was almost more of a burden than Amelia Bones could bear.

However, given that stimulus, it was hardly surprising that she noticed a secret trend going on with middle class wizarding families quitting jobs and selling their houses, moving out of sight. Nor had it taken her long to track this migration down, so she'd arrived in time for Harry's great entry speech, welcoming people to their town, and to the young lad's astonishment she was waiting for him as he left the stage.

"You and I should talk," the head of the DMLE told him bluntly.

"Everything here is perfectly legal... mostly," Harry, to his own surprise, wilted under the experienced auror's gaze, squeaking out the last word guiltily despite not meaning to.

"Glad to hear it," she told him, taking his arm and leading him off to a private nook where they could chat. "Perhaps I can help you with the rest. But first, there are some things we should discuss."

Setting the boy down out of sight of the crowds while Lockhart stepped forward and gave his speech (considerably longer than Harry's) Amelia loomed over the boy and stared him in the face. "Okay, start talking. You just said you built this town to survive the upcoming wars. What do you mean? What wars?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Harry shot back pleasantly, unruffled by her mannerisms. Leaning back, he told her, "Right now we've got the Dark Lord Dumbledore ruling over us and squashing all resistance, and he only just announced over the Wireless that he'll be bringing back Voldemort as a distraction. That sounds an awful lot like war to me."

Amelia's face revealed nothing of her feelings, so Harry began to reach into his bookbag he carried with him. "If you don't believe me about Dumbledore, I have a paper here you can read..."

"I've read it," she declared, her face softening as she saw him start to withdraw a copy of the last issue of the Prophet. Now she at least knew where this movement had come from. And, come to think of it, she agreed with the principle.

If the Ministry of Mismanagement won't defend you (and it wouldn't) the only thing left to do was to protect yourself, and perhaps your neighbors. With a sigh, she stopped invading the boy's personal space and began explaining, "Albus invaded the Ministry and obliviated me, then took command of my troops - command which he's kept ever since. He had my aurors collect the copies of that they came across, but put me in charge of their destruction. I reread one and remembered, so instead of destroying them I saved every copy for use later."

Harry frowned in concentration, nodding along with her. The House Elves had done much the same at Hogwarts. They had collected newspapers inside of the castle, but had not destroyed them. Those had gotten captured and removed by the escaping forces, and now were in Harry's possession. "That reminds me, Dumbledore cannot as easily control people who are on their guard against him. So we should reverse the Obliviates performed on people who move into Godric's Hollow, so they can recall that day of terror where Dumbledore set our own government's aurors against them. We can also have any who have not yet read the last issue of the Daily Prophet read it, and make sure each house has their own copy as a permanent reference."

He looked up at her gladly and shrugged. "Depriving an enemy of willing converts from among your ranks is generally a very good thing to do. Also, a healthy distrust of your enemy helps build solidarity against a common foe. And it saves so much trouble to put people on guard against BOTH their foes so there won't be nasty surprises later, down the road."

The woman's eyebrows had risen during this discourse. "You can reverse Oblivates?"

Harry met her eyes and nodded. "How to do it was in a book that fell out of the Headmaster's window on the day we tried escaping from Hogwarts."

The woman rubbed her eyes. "You and I need to have a longer chat than I thought. WHAT escape from Hogwarts?!"

Harry smiled and began to explain. Then, getting a better idea, he dragged her to where he had a pensieve and showed her instead.

At the conclusion Amelia's monocle fell out of her face.

Rubbing her eyes again, she declared, "You sure perform well under fire, kid." And she'd never before believed that she'd be granting what was probably her highest compliment to a thirteen-year-old. "So, most of you are legally Beauxbatons students?"

"Legally," he agreed. "But you saw what happened."

"On French territory, too. An outright act of war." She whistled. "You're right to be so concerned. I knew he'd taken over the Ministry by force, but this... he doesn't recognize many rules, does he?"

Harry shook his head. "None but his own, which exist for his own purposes."

The Head of the DMLE clapped a hand to his shoulder. "Alright, Potter. You've got the best thing going. I'll help you."

"You might want to live here, too," Harry told her. "It's safer that way."

But the woman shook her head. "Couldn't afford the house. Susan's fees are so high, and I don't belong to any of the bribe-circles at work, so I can barely manage the place I've got. These are shaping up to be enormous."

The boy laughed. "THAT'S not a concern!"

Before she could announce that she wasn't taking bribes from him or anyone the boy had already rummaged into that bookbag of his and pulled out a snow globe, putting it into her hands. "The Bones family manor. Dumbledore stole probably a hundred family estates during the last war, my own among them. But I've got a staff that can restore it to full size, and we've already plotted for manor lots to surround the town proper."

Amelia took the globe reverently, staring at it with a sort of sad smile and tears forming at the corners of her eyes and she recalled her childhood home, and what it could mean to Susan to live there. "Yes, Harry. I thank you very much. That would be perfect. Although," here she rolled her eyes, "I may have to sell off some of the relics inside to pay the estate tax."

Harry's grin grew even wider. "Now that shouldn't be a problem, either!" He then set it in her hands, alongside the cherished orb she wasn't quite willing to put down yet, the original Bones Plant Pot magical patent application.

"I was thinking one of the industries of this town would be to create these, and since the patent rightly belongs to your family..." He trailed off, obviously enjoying the woman's emotional extremes.

Amelia's face became a maternal smile. "You know, at this rate I may find my family so indebted to you the only way I could repay your kindness would be to grant you Susan as a wife. I'm near that point now."

"Ah, uhm. I'm already taken." Harry blushed.

"Oh?" the woman raised an eyebrow. "So, you're strictly a two-woman guy?"

Harry gaped at her.

It was all Amelia could do not to appear TOO smug. "Oh, at your school no one seems to have reacted to Miss Granger and Miss Lovegood's announcements of being engaged to you. It's possible

that everyone is so distracted that the news simply hasn't sunk in. But sooner or later the fervor that's been going on in the rest of the wizarding world will reach there. And I assure you, there is no hotter topic in our world just now."

Harry tried to delicately pass it off. "Oh, we're expecting Ginny, Ron, and especially Albus Dumbledore are going start trying to break our contracts."

Amelia shrugged. "Well, in that case I can do you a favor. The Wizengamot runs on a system privilege and influence, and your current fiancées have neither, leaving you open to that attack you fear. Having myself as a family member would cause half the Wizengamot to be more cautious about costing you your current fiancées. So, rather than see you lose both, I'll grant you one more. Consider yourself engaged to Susan, nephew-in-law."

Harry gaped again.

"After all, you did exert yourself in a situation of great danger to try and save Hufflepuff House all because my niece asked you to." The woman enjoyed teasing him in his distress. "That's so noble and chivalrous that I just HAVE to provide her hand in marriage to the dashing young hero to carry out her wish! The task certainly more than warrants her hand in response."

The little boy squirmed miserably. That tradition of 'carry out a great deed to prove yourself worthy to marry the girl' theme so prevalent in fairy tales was far from a dead tradition in magical society. No longer popular to do, as it cost so many young lovers their lives, but not unknown either - and almost expected of a hero such as him.

The woman laughed.

She forbore, but both thought the phrase, 'And didn't she reward you with a kiss? By the Old Rules, a kiss was as good as an declaration of engagement.'

That threw a great deal of weight behind her earlier joke of her being almost required to engage him to her niece. The formula of 'girl gave

task, guy did heroic deed, got kiss, married and lived happily ever after' was the epitome of romantic among witches. And, while far from mandatory, if she phrased it right before the courts it'd be legally binding.

if fact, if he were to put his engagement to Hermione in terms of 'saved her life from a troll, plan to get married as reward' the crusty old geezers in the Wizengamot would be far less likely to contest it, as it flew so close to the actual tradition reflected in the fairy tales: Saved a maiden? Marry her. But applying that formula would bind him inescapably to Susan as well.

The only thing preventing the same formula from applying to Ginny was that she'd never laid her lips on him, and Hermione had (if only recently).

Harry almost mentioned that he wasn't even the same race as Susan anymore, but then plenty of fairy dalliances, and even marriages, to humans flitted across his mind. And he wasn't anywhere close to ready to divulge that secret yet!

Besides, the woman was probably kidding.

Right?

But Amelia wasn't finished crowing, "Besides, I almost HAVE to marry you off to Susan! With our society in tumult a girl needs all the stability she can get, and I can't even name a wizard twice her age who is half as well set to weather our current crises as you. Plus, after what you said about creating a magical shopping mall using your 'one roof' concession, and owning your own magical town, supporting one extra wife won't be a problem for you. So we'd be fools to let you get away. You're just too good a catch. Besides, and this is what to me is the important part: I know my niece likes you that way."

Harry cringed. He'd forgotten he'd mentioned to Hermione and Luna what those Wizengamot concessions actually meant to him in that memory she'd just viewed of the Hogwarts escape. And he'd also made reference to the beast concession.

It wouldn't take a woman like Amelia long before she connected what he'd admitted getting out of the 'sell things' concession and him having exulted over the beast thing. And when she did she'd learn he had the potential to be the start of one of the wealthiest families in England.

Looking in her eyes it was clear she already knew.

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Author's Notes:

I find I was doing Hermione a grave disservice: as an author's device I need to have someone to explain things to in a reasonable tone of voice, and though I could excuse it originally, I fear I can no longer keep Hermione in that role. That girl is too smart to stay ignorant. Before this I've used the 'blind-sided' ploy to say that, brilliant as she is, the bookworm is ignorant of these areas. But, as we all know, Hermione does not permit herself to stay uninformed for long, and she has already been playing catch up.

I can either be untrue to her character and deny her that growth we all know she deserves, keeping her down so I have my writing tool, or I can let her spring free of my restrictions and be that character we all know she is.

Put that way my choice must be obvious.

So, I find myself in need of someone to fill the Watson role, the person who hangs out with the genius in order to have all of the brilliant deductions explained to him/her, so they can, by this device, be told to the reader. And, and here is the kicker, they have to be someone close enough to be let in on all of the main character's secrets.

Oh, and much as I dealt with the Escape From Hogwarts story arc by dealing with Dumbledore's perspective first, then going back to cover the same period from the trio's point of view, this chapter is the few weeks it took to get the town going. The next ought to be their other

projects and events covering the same period of time, just grouping things together for ease of understanding.

Chapter Fifty by Lionheart

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It had taken two weeks for Harry's plan concerning Godric's Hollow to reach the point where residents were moving in and Amelia appeared. During that time several things had gone on back at school. Snape's potions classes were shriveling down to nothing but Ron and Slytherins, but other happy events occurred, including Hermione's birthday celebration.

"Happy Birthday Hermione!!" cried the entire student study club. They'd staged it during that so more students could attend than they could've if it had been held in the Gryffindor common room - and most of those being tutored had chosen to attend.

Hermione had never had a celebration half so large. Heck! The biggest birthday party she'd had til that point had ten people attend. This was nearer to three-quarters of the school!

It was a might overwhelming for the girl, to be honest.

Party streamers and ribbons hung about, with brightly colored balloons and other decorations. Harry had brought back his House Elves to help out, and the food and decorations were both magnificent. Tables were laden with all kinds of succulent dishes, and the guests could hardly wait for the birthday girl to be ushered forward so they could begin the birthday feast.

Fare at mealtimes had become rather simple since the Prophet disaster, as the elves Dumbledore had sent out to steal papers had mostly not come back since, leaving the castle terribly understaffed.

Garbage was accumulating in the Hogwarts corridors as they no longer had sufficient House Elves to deal with everything - and Albus had insisted that certain amounts of spying could not be neglected (and that they never serve fried chicken again).

So the magnificent feast prepared was, sad to say, of far more interest to most attending this party than the birthday girl. For that matter, the birthday girl herself had been eating that much plainer food same as they on Normal Days, so it was of considerable interest to her as well.

After that, they immediately went on to her opening presents before they went out to the lawn to play games. Hermione was practically intimidated by the high stack, an entire long table had been covered by gifts, so the wise people running the party started some games going on in the background while, in the foreground, people would take up their presents, present them to Hermione who would open them and thank the giver, then repeat.

Harry naturally went first, having had to cast a featherweight charm on his package as it looked like he was giving her a complete encyclopedia set.

Opening the wrapping paper revealed what looked to be an encyclopedia set.

"Thanks. What is it?" Hermione gave a puzzled gaze to her fiancé, trying hard NOT to tell him how impersonal a gift of books could be. Sometimes his growing up with the Dursleys had left the most unfortunate gaps in his social graces.

The boy smiled as he answered, "It's the Vandergeist Collection, all fourteen books he wrote, not including Basics of Brewing which you already have a copy of. So fifteen in total."

"HARRY!!!" she squealed joyously, launching herself at him in a hug.

"Is it true that Potions Mastery is often achieved by book five?" Luna turned her head from second in line to inquire of him, proving that she didn't know everything about their world.

"Uh huh," Harry agreed, still holding and hugging a giddy Hermione. "And the standard thought is 'what could you want more than your mastery grade?' So most shops don't carry the remainder of the

collection. You won't believe what I had to go through to get copies of books six through fifteen. In the end I had to have them reprinted."

What he did not say was since there was little enough point in setting type on an old-style printing press without printing multiple copies (hand-copied would be better, and cheaper, if you'd wanted only one. But the printer refused to do that) so Harry had purchased a thousand copies each of the entire set.

They'd offered a price break on batches of a thousand. Plus, that would be enough for a complete set of the collection to be placed in each of the four hundred homes of Godric's Hollow, plus filling out the library there, leaving enough to outfit another town of the same size should he ever get the urge (and France or someplace grant him permission), while still leaving a supply to give out as gifts without preventing them from having replacements on hand for lost or damaged books.

Harry'd already given Neville Longbottom the books one through five he'd originally brought for Hermione at a normal bookstore, just to see if the poor lad had the talent without a greasy overbearing bat hanging over his brewing.

For that matter, before giving up on finding the entire set in bookstores he'd gotten books one through five for all three of himself, Hermione and Luna, so he had two more incomplete sets to be giving out. The twins would be likely looking prospects, save that he'd already intended to give them the whole set of fifteen apiece, instead of merely the first five.

Hermione squealed in glee over the magnificent present of knowledge, then Fred and George came forward, cutting in line with some hand-copied sheets, string-bound, uneven and ragged. Their present was not even wrapped.

"Well, we know..." said twin one.

"... it doesn't look like much..." said twin two.

"... but please accept..."

"... this copy of..."

"... some of our research notes," they finished together.

"Thanks," Hermione accepted the sheaf of bound notes carefully, reading the first page to determine what it was, her eyes widening as she did so.

It was priceless.

The twins had written a 'Poor Man's Guide to Replacement Ingredients' for how to approximate more common (and less powerful) potion supplies with other, cheaper, alternates.

It had been necessary for their situation, and there were countless things that applied, in their own ways, portions of what Harry liked to call the 'Rice Principle'. Cooks were always looking for the new taste sensation. Rice wasn't it. But gourmet cooks continued to add rice to things just because it soaked up the flavor of what was next to it. Similarly, steel by itself wasn't magnetic, but exposed to magnetism it could become so. Certain subjects, without being naturally magic, could, when exposed to magic, pick up a bit of that - or at least enough to be useful as potion ingredients.

Through laborious research (and because they were very poor) the twins had worked out dozens of things that functioned like that. They worked as magic in potions, without actually being magic themselves. Most of those were just ways to 'stretch out' an ingredient they didn't have a great supply of, but a couple could stand on their own.

And, of course, they'd also written a short book on the dozens of uses of owl feathers, because the Weasleys had an owl, and so that was one of the few magical creatures the twins could go to for parts on their summer holidays, just like with the family ghoul and garden gnomes.

This was research not printed in any book. It was new knowledge, not even Vandergeist had known these things, and Hermione had the only copy in the world other than the original loose leaf notes of the

twins. She gave off a tremendous squeal as she launched herself to go hug both of them at once.

It actually took quite an effort on the part of her friends for the party not to end at that point as Hermione burrowed into her new books containing all of that delicious knowledge.

As a second gift, Harry gave her a complete set of language lozenges (and the girl immediately gave away the ones she'd already taken copies of, having purchased them separately). He also gave the same to Luna, because her birthday was a fair ways off and they don't want to hold the group back as they all want to acquire the knowledge together.

So Fred and George each got an Old Norse lozenge, and would begin looking into runes in the near future. Other Gryffindors got to learn French or Latin or other languages, as they came up in line to present their gifts and got offered her spare lozenges in return.

Luna's gift came in a box, and appeared at first glance to be a massive stuffed teddy dragon that wagged its tail and could fly, even breathing out pretend flames.

However, the blonde leaned close to explain, "Hidden inside is the Cauldron of Ceridwen. It can make a potion granting wisdom and knowledge. The mixture has to be cooked a year and a day. The first three drops grants wisdom, the rest is a lethal poison. Harry and I found it when we were sifting through the treasures from the vaults. We also discovered this cauldron has been used recently, sometime within our lifetimes, and we believe Dumbledore made use of it personally as one of his many rituals to enhance his mind."

Kissing the side of Hermione's cheek to disguise the whisper, Luna explained, "We already made the mixture, and gave it a spill-proof cap and a self-stirring spoon. So for now keep it as a toy dragon so no one suspects, but in a year and a day you'll have a potion to make you permanently smarter."

Hermione unexpectedly launched out of her chair again to squeeze Luna in one arm and her toy dragon in another, once more squealing in delight.

Several members of the present line shared looks, hoping this wasn't going to be a trend. Many felt they didn't know her well enough to accept hugs.

But, to their secret delight, she kept that response only for priceless gifts; and most of what she got was candy.

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During these weeks they couldn't afford to let up on bedeviling Dumbledore, otherwise that man's HUGE capabilities would come to bear on them and they'd be the ones saying 'ouch'.

They'd gotten a few lucky sucker punches in by surprise those first couple of times and that put him on the ropes. They had to keep him there or his vastly superior skill at this game would come back to haunt them.

And keeping him there was getting slightly more difficult, as dying just didn't seem to distress him the way it once had.

It was remarkable what people could get used to.

However, to give the girl her due, Hermione had asked the brilliant question. "Do you think Snape could bring him back if he wasn't dead?"

And, the answer to that was, 'of course not. You can't bring a man back to life if he isn't dead.'

So, that gave them a whole new range of ways to bedevil Dumbledore.

Harry was continually amazed at the range of spells that the wizarding world had and never used. There was, for example, in a companion volume to the personal grooming spells he'd gotten (a

book, actually, on household charms) a spell used to keep flowers fresh and stop them from wilting that, had they ever thought to apply it, would have been one of the most irreplaceably useful medical charms ever.

The spell, used on flowers, did as it advertised and kept them from wilting, which was a pretty amazing thing, once you'd thought about it. Cut flowers are dead, they just don't know it yet. Their little plant bodies take some time figuring out they've received mortal wounds, and the process of wilting is them shuffling off the mortal coil as they gradually figure that out.

That same spell applied to people (and there was no reason they couldn't) would do basically the same thing, keeping them alive in spite of having received mortal wounds. It wouldn't last forever, but long enough to get them to a hospital and do some rather substantial healing and recovery work.

On plants the spell lasted for weeks. On people, the amount of time you had to save them from mortal wounds was most often measured in minutes. So it would take one of the most hectic emergencies of all time and render it almost casual if it had anything like the same duration on animals.

So, to try it out they dropped Dumbledore into a pit trap where the bottom was spiked with broken off chicken bones pointed upwards, and as he was dying in agony they applied the charm to him to keep him alive and stable.

It worked, placing the man in a near-death state that was neither fully alive nor dead, somehow hovering in stasis with his body processes frozen. His wounds did not bleed, his heart did not beat, nor did he breathe, but he was still dimly aware of his surroundings in a dreamlike state.

Seeing as how the man showed no detectable lifesigns, Harry immediately sent him off to one of those muggle places that offers to freeze the body on death so you can be revived upon the discovery of the cure for whatever ails you - only he only signed up Dumbledore

for having his head and balls frozen, so those people whipped out the circular saw and knives and chopped him up.

Harry was tempted to leave him there until Hermione pointed out the man would die whenever the spell ran out regardless of whether he was chopped up or frozen or just left to lie out in the middle of a field somewhere. He'd taken mortal wounds, and the moment that charm expired they'd kill him.

So, to entertain the old man while he died Harry went in and stole the man's head back again and enchanted it as a Quidditch ball - a bludger to be precise, shrinking it to size and covering it in an outer layer of iron so it would look right. Then, because it was a terrible thing to do to anyone, he did the same for the man's balls and replaced the bludgers in the school set with them.

Oliver Wood used to have the Gryffindor Quidditch team out three times a week to practice, and they mostly continued on that schedule, forcing other teams to practice at the same pace. Also Fred and George were among the best beaters to ever play. They smacked those bludgers around so hard and often with those clubs of theirs that it was amazing and dismaying to others.

But the other teams still sought hard to match them.

Dumbledore might not be fully alive or able to move in that state, but by the look on his face he could certainly feel more wounds as they were acquired. So having his head and groin repeatedly smacked around with bats gave him a whole new definition of pain and suffering during those practice meets.

So Harry started an unofficial Quidditch tournament at school. Anyone could play, forming new teams as they liked, and the prize was new brooms for everyone on their team, going to whoever won the most games against the other pick-up teams over the next month.

Suddenly those Quidditch balls were getting smacked around like never before as those students figured out whoever PLAYED the most games was liable to Win the most games. So they had them running day and night!

Soon every Quidditch fanatic was out there trying to play, because nearly every witch or wizard could use a brand new broom.

Harry excused himself, saying as the sponsor he really ought not to play. Plus, he put a time limit of thirty minutes on each game so more players could get out there and take their chances on the field; but also so no team would get exhausted by having too long a turn, and so everyone could stay fresh in rotation. Also, because the games were shorter, students who had free periods could get out there and play during the school day.

Between all the eager new players those balls were, literally, getting bashed about at all hours of the day and night. The schedule was full a week in advance, with plenty of people eager to fill up in case of a cancellation.

As an interesting side effect, because the Snitch was rarely found in those short games, the Chasers, Keepers and Beaters suddenly became far more important to the games, and those players had a chance to be highlighted.

That was, quite frankly, to the good for everyone.

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"The dragon itself is far from worthless," Luna explained as the Fey Trio all went down to the lake side, holding hands with each other, a stuffed dragon in her own arms, while Harry cuddled one as well. "They are a special toy called Cuddle Companions, magic plush animals that when cuddled, those holding the matching animals in the set also feel the love, and vice versa. A nice way to stay in contact even though we sleep in different dormitories."

Indeed, all three could already feel this was so. But it was nice to have an explanation to go with those feelings.

"Splendid!" Hermione, who had never felt such affection before, could hardly bear to put the animal down.

Nor were the others unaffected. Harry himself was practically giddy. He'd had less love in his life than either of the girls, and was soaking it up like a dry sponge.

Luna giggled.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Well, seeing as it's my birthday I thought a few other people should receive gifts. So right about now Remus Lupin ought to be receiving an anonymous letter, one containing an article cut out of a French newspaper detailing Sirius' trial and subsequent release, finding him innocent of all charges, wrongfully imprisoned, and granting political asylum. It ought to be interesting to see what his reaction is."

While agreeing that would be interesting, the other two set down their chests and got out their brooms and began flying lessons for Hermione, using her brand new training broom Harry had bought for her much earlier.

It was now time for her to learn how to use it properly, and they chose the lake side because the Quidditch pitch was jammed full, and would be for the rest of the month, at least.

Unfortunately Ron, who naturally had created his own pick-up team for the unofficial Quidditch tournament, while waiting for his turn on the field saw what they were up to, flying low over the water to get Hermione used to being on a stable broom. So the brat flew over and had to say mean things about how slow she was, and how much better on a broom he was, until the trio were near to calling the whole thing off because of the problems Ron was creating from his complete and utter lack of tact.

Hermione, however, to all of their surprises eventually lost her temper and then summoned the brat's broom right out from under him, landing the jerk (who'd been showing off doing loops) head first in the water, then following that up with freezing charms.

After the temperamental redhead went off to the hospital wing to get his frostbite seen to, the bookworm began flying around with whole new confidence and made astounding progress on her broom.

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Remus Lupin stared at a letter, face aghast and unable to believe his poor unfortunate eyes as the article dangled limply from off his fingers.

It was early afternoon and already the man popped open the top of a bottle of firewhiskey. He had three in his room, and the werewolf honestly expected he'd go through them all drowning his misery over this.

After all those oaths the Headmaster made him swear, to find out this...

The tender man wept; then proceeded to get very, very drunk.

|||

While Dumbledore was indisposed was a perfect time to work deviltry on him.

Most of the Muggleborns in the castle had not been in on the joke, and so had tried to assure those who'd asked them that movies were not real, and you could not trust what you'd seen in them.

However, all that came to a screeching halt when a certain very familiar old style ambulance pulled up in front of Hogwarts, sirens blaring, parking right on the front steps to disgorge three adult muggles (one man and two women) wearing very familiar jumpsuits and carrying nuclear accelerators on their backs.

"Hey, anybody see a ghost?" Harry walked in the front doors to demand, a brainy Hermione and eccentric Luna both behind him, all disguised as muggle parapsychologists turned ghostbusters.

Hogwarts specters saw them, froze in sputtering terror for a heartbeat, then flew screaming from the scene, scattering in every direction.

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Professor McGonagall looked up from where she was presiding over lunch in the Great Hall to see screaming ghosts phase through the walls in hundreds and all start gibbering at her at once, drowning each other out in their mutual terror and making the point impossible to understand...

... until a very distinct sound effect was heard, then an unmistakable stream of light sprang forth from the doors, catching Peeves around his ghostly waist and holding him fast.

The rest of the Hogwarts specters scattered, panicked, in all directions.

It had actually taken a bit of work to adapt the exorcism spells in that book that had fallen out of the headmaster's window to match the appropriate sounds and visual effects, but Harry managed it with aplomb as he held the stream on Peeves while Hermione calmly slid a trap under him.

Seeing the ENTIRE Great Hall staring at them in varying degrees of shock and horror, Harry caught McGonagall's eyes and stated calmly, "Don't mind us, Ma'am. We're exterminators. Someone reported that you've got a nasty infestation of spooks, specters, and creeps that go 'bump' in the night. It's all been paid for. So sit back and enjoy your meal while we take care of this."

The fork fell from McGonagall's nerveless fingers as she gaped open-mouthed at the trio of apparent muggles in their all-too-familiar uniforms.

Peeves winked out, sucked into the 'trap' (actually a disguised portal to the other side - no need to worry about storage that way), and the ghostbusting trio went off deeper into the castle, hunting more panicky specters.

Nobody would ever again believe the muggleborns stating that those movies weren't real. Even the muggleborns themselves began to doubt it.

The spirits of Hogwarts would suffer a terrible afternoon and evening, losing many of their number, before McGonagall recovered herself enough to track down the ghostbusters and tell them their services were not needed, that the ghosts were welcome, even needed at the castle.

Of course, by that time they'd lost several dozen of them and the remainder had either fled the castle or would be terrified, trembling in corners for years, even centuries after that, basically crippling that spy ring forever.

And, before they went, the ghostbusters insisted that McGonagall, in her capacity as Deputy Headmistress, sign off on some paperwork, telling her they had to have the forms filled out that the job was completed so they could collect payment from their benefactor. And McGonagall, just like everybody in that type of situation, didn't read a thing as she'd signed the forms, just eager to get the disruptive muggles to leave the castle.

So she had no IDEA the kind of permissions she'd granted to the trio!

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Back in the Forbidden Forest the chain keeping Fawkes bound dissolved, link by link, one link a day over a period of thirteen days while the kids was busy having a party for Hermione, busting ghosts, building the town and getting residents to move there.

On the day before Harry's conversation with the head of the DMLE Fawkes sprang free.

That was a joyous day.

And the first thing Fawkes did upon being freed, before going off to the phoenix version of a holiday home for the next three or four centuries, was to introduce the one who'd bound him for so long to the inside of an inferno, firebird style, flame-transporting Dumbledore into an active volcano right after Snape had successfully tracked down his pieces, reassembled the still-living body, and successfully revived him.

The bird then flamed back and caused massive destruction in the laboratory, burning up tools and supplies and virtually everything that wasn't utterly and completely fireproof (which, rather unfortunately, included the chests that contained their horcruxes - as Dumbledore had sought hard to make those and the soul anchoring amulets they contained completely invulnerable).

Snape burned down to ash, priceless stockpiles of valuable ingredients got incinerated, glassware and ironware melted down to slag, and finally the roof of that chamber collapsed, crushing most of what remained down to powder; save for those nearly invulnerable chests and the horcruxes they contained.

As a final insult, Fawkes flamed out and reappeared with a bundimun, a patch of greenish fungus with eyes skilled at creeping under floorboards to infest wizarding houses, dropping the slimy, acidic creature right into the box where Albus kept his spare hairs - which immediately dissolved to feed the ooze.

After all, phoenixes were good and noble and light creatures... but they're also very, very, very nasty when they're angry at you. One look at the basilisk should show that much.

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Crawling out of the volcano (after all, he'd been through the fireproofing ritual himself, and knew a bubblehead charm to avoid choking to death on poisonous fumes), Dumbledore could, without fear of contradiction, state that his phoenix had somehow gotten freed.

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Author's Notes:

In my reality, Peeves was a ghost who'd learned how to manipulate objects on the material plane. I prefer that to Rowling's stupid assertion that he had never been alive.

So he was perfectly vulnerable to being sent to the Other Side. And, though I know I did not mention it in-text, they had great reason to do so, as Peeves was allowed so much leniency... why? Well, in this story it was for the same reasons as Snape - he was too useful to Dumbledore, who allowed him to get away with anything in exchange for services rendered.

So exorcising Peeves just cost Albus one of his most useful agents.

Chapter Fifty-One
by Lionheart

|||

Dumbledore distress and rage was even more terrible than when he'd lost Trelawney and those paintings.

His phoenix had been freed.

That this was supposedly impossible did not contradict the fact that it must, somehow, have been done. And it was a catastrophe of immeasurable proportions to his plans!

Dumbledore had seen early on that mastery of a phoenix granted most of the same benefits as possession of a philosopher's stone, namely unlimited health and wealth.

The health they granted came in different forms. A philosopher's stone could delay old age indefinitely, putting off any further decrepitude, keeping one at the same physical point of life forever so long as it was used regularly. A phoenix, on the other hand, granted a far more useful form of health in the immediate term. It could not keep one alive forever, but the tears they gave could cure any manner of injury, disease or poisoning.

Dumbledore had always enjoyed a shocking degree of good health for his age, even before he'd started dying and resetting that, acting far more spry and energetic than his years would indicate, simply by treating himself with regular doses of those tears. Every ache, twinge or sneeze got treated by phoenix tears. He was not subject to most of the pains of old age as he had, since his youth, kept dosing himself with the world's most potent remedy every time he got a sniffle.

Even as he'd grown old he had never permitted himself to come down with any of the degenerative conditions that most beings considered standard with advancing years. His joints worked as well at a hundred years old as they had when he was a youth. His organs and vitals had always been as strong as they ever were. His eyes remained clear and sharp, and he wore glasses for only two reasons:

they could carry useful enchantments (and his did), and they matched the grandfatherly image he found so useful. In fact, he'd had to prepare a special potion to allow his skin to wrinkle and his hair to turn white in order to cultivate that kindly grandfather persona.

Phoenix tears could not keep him alive forever, but they could sustain the bright energy of youth for far longer simply by beating off all of the illnesses and gradual accumulation of weaknesses and organ scars that stole vitality bit by bit. And, by virtue of having retained the extra health of youth, the Headmaster could be assured of living out an extra long span. He'd calculated that he could count on at least twice the average lifespan of a wizard, which was itself twice what a muggle could expect, barring early deaths by violence or disease, of course (both of which he had substantial protections against, although deaths by violence had actually been useful to reset himself to a much younger body, granting yet further protection from old age).

So he'd been anticipating being around for three hundred years, at least, if not more, and that was even without considering the periodic revivals to a much younger body. Then possession of a phoenix had, after much scheming, convinced enough people of his trustworthiness that it'd finally brought into his grasp a philosopher's stone at last!

That had granted him access to the one form of health a phoenix did not grant: immortality. However, the wealth aspect of a philosopher's stone came almost as a disappointment. It only provided gold.

When Dumbledore had first heard a description of a phoenix' powers he'd immediately seen what was, to him, the most obvious use - one which to his amazement everyone else seemed to have missed.

Smuggling.

The mystical birds' powers to lift large weights and transport themselves tracelessly through wards and instantly cross great distances were perfect for moving an arbitrarily large amount of goods, legal or not, anywhere he wanted. Customs and border guard spells be damned!

Dumbledore had made a significant fortune (which he downplayed and hid) by selling phoenix tears. So he'd had gold in plenty early on, from the very first moment he'd mastered Fawkes. But more than that, he'd made a surreal fortune by using Fawkes to transport large quantities of materials across borders, evading taxes on normal products, fees on restricted ones, and laws on illegal ones.

Their flame transport ability was instant, crossed all known wards and was undetectable by magical means, what more could a smuggler ask?

Albus had, through a variety of fronts, cornered the market on all types of smuggling he'd cared to be involved in. A substantial blow would come to the underworld markets as a result of that lost pipeline, which he noted with pride had been utterly dependable for well over a hundred years.

Having been in control of one of the single most profitable markets in the magical world had granted him as much cash as he'd wanted. Every law passed to restrict anything had meant more money for his coffers! He could (and HAD) afforded to do virtually anything he pleased.

Government belongs to the man who can pay the most bribes. That has been true from the early reigns of kings on down to modern times, as true in the muggle world as the magical one. And illegal business has always been more profitable than legal ones. If it wasn't, it wouldn't be worth the risk. From this we see that the practice of crime buying shares in government influence was an ancient one, as they were the ones able to afford the most bribes.

And thus we can plainly see how any government that has been in place for any length of time grows gradually more and more corrupt, as criminals buy more and more influence in it, until they occupy the whole government.

An infinite bribe allowance could accomplish virtually anything, but Albus no longer needed vast amounts to pay for spies or bribes in normal operations. People trusted him to where they voted on his behalf without substantial bribes now, and most of his spies did it

because they felt they were passing along information to 'The Leader of the Light' and doing it 'For The Greater Good'. But having infinite money had really helped him in the past, and it irked the Headmaster to lose that, as it vastly curtailed his emergency options and stung his pride.

Still, Dumbledore remained in possession of a budget more on par with a small country than a person, having very wisely (in his opinion) been stealing markets and businesses to cover the real source of his wealth. He could also cash in on the political credit of 'shutting down' the massive illegal smuggling operations that had been going on, and seize the vast warehouses of goods that he was supposed to transport - taking them for himself, of course.

The vacant Potter family properties had been used, to his vast amusement, this past decade by Dumbledore as warehouses for those illegal goods. They were not alone in this, but those properties were plentiful and prominent, and it would feel magnificent to hurt Harry by seizing those estates for having 'been discovered' in possession of vast stashes of illegal goods.

It would not hurt Dumbledore to expose them, even if the Ministry claimed a share, as his real caches of merchandise were all concealed elsewhere.

The scar above the Headmaster's left knee that was a perfect map of the London underground included all the sealed off or abandoned places, and Albus had used those spaces as rent-free warehouses to store smuggled goods. His scar was enchanted, much like the Marauder's Map, to constantly update - a catalog of all of his current stores of money and ill-gotten gains.

There was no risk of anyone else finding them. All transport to and from those locations had been done by Fawkes, so no one knew of them, and no traces of traffic in or out existed for someone to follow.

And the only record was that scar above his knee, which, being attached to the man, he'd always had with him at all times.

He had even been carefully, and indirectly, seeding vampire clans around the Underground in places where they made any kind of physical access to his storehouses there too dangerous for most to even consider!

However much he'd used him for money, however, that was still only part of his phoenix' contribution to the Headmaster's power. The health had been equally important, not just for himself, but he owed his whole 'Leader of the Light' persona to being the man who had access to an infinite font of tears able to heal virtually any disease or injury.

Most of the goodwill he enjoyed came from distribution of those tears. They had meant life for more than himself. You can buy a lot of loyalty if you can descend as a rescuing angel and give them back their health.

Oh dear.

Dumbledore paled dramatically, fearing death, disease and dismemberment for the first time since stealing that pile of phoenix ash and eggshell from Nicholas Flamel. It had been well worth the end of his tutelage in alchemy to seize those absolutely priceless reagents and make off into the night with them, back to Hogwarts where he knew the Goblet of Fire lay.

Without Fawkes, Dumbledore lost access to unlimited healing, and most of the casual use of his horcrux, as it could no longer be used trivially or for minor regeneration of bodies. It was now far more complex and difficult to raise himself or Snape from the dead without that continual source of tears.

Every death would now be far more difficult to reverse, or would be once he ran out of the barrels of tears stored in the Hogwarts vaults. He ought to go check on those soon, to determine how long they would last under present needs, but there had just been so many emergencies!

Well, it was long past time to start whittling those down! Dumbledore quickly grabbed a sheet of parchment and dipped his quill, scribing a note to Moody that he finished, then held up in the air before paling again as it failed to be snatched from his hands by talons before disappearing in a burst of flame.

Without Fawkes he no longer had a perfect mail system that was impossible to intercept or fake. Moody would never accept a letter as coming from him unless it was delivered by phoenix.

He would have to go see him in person, as he needed someone assassinated.

McGonagall was just another dupe, as was Hagrid, having only the framed pictures that the Twinkling Tyrant allowed them to see. Fudge had been his scapegoat, someone to blame for all things wrong, and his replacement was as well. But Moody was among his most useful servants, and was like Snape and Filch in knowing that Dumbledore was Dark, and not caring about that in the least.

This was in part because Moody was Dumbledore's personal hit-wizard.

The ancient Headmaster had many useful servants, serving many roles, and of all different levels both of usefulness and awareness. None could be seen as equal, or even truly people. In Dumbledore's worldview only he was human. Everyone else was some kind of animal or object to be used at his whim. But one could trust a hammer to do those things a hammer was good for.

And he had a toolbox filled to overflowing with useful tools! Hagrid was chief among his many 'fetch and carry' types, and served him well as a go-for. McGonagall, bless her dear ignorant heart, was his cover at the school and more or less the real Head of Hogwarts, serving virtually all of those duties belonging to him as Headmaster, save a few only he reserved for himself.

Both were blessedly ignorant of his real nature, and thus far more convincing tools to use to persuade others to pursue his interests on the Light side.

On the other hand, to play both sides of the game one was required to have both black and white pieces. White pieces served him because they felt he was their Leader, and served The Greater Good. Black pieces, on the other hand, Albus admitted to a far closer kinship to. They served him because he granted them concessions for certain kinds of aid and support, something he found it far easier to relate to personally. And of course he had a deliberate and premeditated use for them in all his endless schemes!

Filch was a Cleaner, in more ways than one, although far more useful in the disposal of bodies than in tidying the castle that House Elves would've seen to anyway. Snape was a kindred soul (if either creature could ever be said to have one), his personal Potions Master and one of the few souls trustworthy enough to revive him on a regular basis.

But Moody was his personal killer.

Mad-Eye had worked closely enough to Dumbledore that he ranked as being an "old friend", and had his magical eye, among other things, enchanted by the Elder Wand to see through Death's Invisibility Cloak. What other reason was there to have a paranoid ex-Auror on call?

What other kind of people act or behave similarly to Moody?

Assassins.

And now it was time to bring his hit-wizard out of mothballs, because Albus was long overdue for having a few people assassinated. If his killer did not insist on large amounts of accurate information before making a hit, Albus would have immediately and unhesitatingly sent him against this Dark Colonel. But that would have to wait until he had more of the situation defined. Still, the man could be almost equally useful killing the Granger girl, as she clearly had too great an influence over the Boy-Who-Just-Wouldn't-Die-When-Albus-Told-Him-To-And-Was-Becoming-More-Difficult-Every-Day!

No, Albus' days may have been filled with distractions of late, but even so he could see that Harry had grown too strong, too popular with the other students, and it was time to cut away his support a little. And the boy's chief supporter since coming to school had been that filthy mudblood girl.

So, since Albus no longer had the luxury of arranging the terrible accident himself, he would have to farm that labor out. He had fallen too far behind, so it was time he started delegating a little more of this mess.

What else were servants for?

So the Headmaster went about his plan, completely unaware that Harry was even then using that staff to place all of his family properties into storage mode, ignorant of the vast amounts of illicit treasure going with them.

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The purpose behind 'Bedevil Dumbledore Day' could be summed up in one truism: 'Never let your enemies deal with just one problem at a time'. This could be reflected in a simple rule of physics: force concentrated in a single point is powerful, but that same force spread out over an area is less so.

Giving a person a fire to deal with was one problem. Cutting off his water supply was another, and shooting at his firemen as he tried to put out the blaze... well, that house was gunna burn down, and possibly the block with it.

That sort of thing had happened during riots, and it was never pretty. But in Dumbledore's case it was just an example to illustrate a point. The more problems a person had at once, the less effective he was at dealing with any of them, and they were doing their best to maximize that, as it was the one advantage they had over the powerful old man.

Dumbledore was magically powerful, politically untouchable, head of every public office that mattered, utterly evil and a complete bastard.

He was also rather fond of the old phrase, "Youth and skill will always fail to old age and treachery."

The Fey Trio were striving their hardest to prove him wrong.

So they went to Snape's house and stripped it bare of all books, valuables, even the furnishings (they could use them as firewood later, and you never knew where stuff was hidden - except in this case where Harry could easily rape the Potions Master's undefended mind for that information). Included were a truly astonishing number of rare or even forgotten potions tomes, some detailing mixtures that had passed away into myth. Severus had made it his business to steal those out of every house they'd looted as Death Eaters, and he had a truly astonishing collection.

Lucius Malfoy had also been in the business of stealing or looting books, but he focused more of his attention on charms, and had to split those with other interested Death Eaters. Still others collected their own favorite subjects, but Tom Riddle personally had all of the rare Magical Creatures tomes delivered to himself.

Aware that the Headmaster intended to revive him, Harry had also gone out of his way to collect Voldemort's stolen belongings out of the various caches and secret stashes he'd made.

Everything that landed in the Dark Idiot's hands was going to be used to hurt them, and if not them then someone else. So it was far better now to strip those bare than to face the advantage the enemy got from using them later.

The Dark Lord would use them if he could get his hands on them again. That was why he'd stored things, to have them in case he'd ever needed them; and right after a revival when he was at his weakest would be a fine time to use anything for rendering either himself or his side more powerful.

So, the less Tom had, the more he was liable to struggle during a comeback.

Weakening your enemy and strengthening yourself was the whole name of the game. On the field, when armies met, this was called 'combat'. Doing economic violence to each other was called 'business' nowadays, and having your infrastructure beefed up while weakening your enemy's was politics. But it all amounted to the same thing: when in conflict do what you can to increase your own capabilities, and reduce those of your opponent.

So they grabbed the stuff Harry knew about just so Voldemort wouldn't have it. Also, some of it made really nifty additions to his library that he'd really like to get around to reading one day, but right now he was fairly busy.

Also, grabbing stuff was useful in that later on down the line you might turn out to need exactly what you'd grabbed earlier.

Ward stones and runic enhancers stolen by Alice from the Ministry were a perfect example. They'd used all they could employ effectively around the town he was building, but they still had more. Rather than sell the excess off or abandon it somewhere, they'd stored it for use later, and now again Harry was finding that useful, this time to mark the perimeters of his property and begin securing them.

The Potters had a great deal of property. But, like most aristocratic families (as the vast majority of magicians viewed themselves) most of that was cut up into fairly small chunks scattered all over the place.

Harry had made a quick and dirty decision to gather all of the houses and other 'improved property' (basically stuff with permanent buildings he'd rather not lose) into snow globes for moving out of country for safety. The only exception to this would be Potter Manor itself, and the original and expanded Crystal palace attached to it; as for appearances he required that manor for his official dwelling place around Godric's Hollow, and the Crystal Palace had been converted into greenhouses that were far more valuable here than anywhere, as what they produced in Britain could stay and be sold in Britain, evading a whole host of import taxes and regulations.

The unimproved properties... well, there wasn't much that could be done to destroy a field full of dirt, nothing that anyone who later

wanted to capture that land for himself was liable to do. And, anyway, Harry had to maintain some possessions in England to retain those lovely rights and privileges that the easily fooled Wizengamot had so recently granted him.

Still, if he was going to be leaving anything behind, he'd like for it to be very well protected, and was willing to work to see that protection enacted. So he gathered them all into one place for ease of defending, then put up his best wards around them using those stones and things collected by Alice.

Luna had pointed out that, as her champions, they acted with the Fairy Queen's authority. And, in her absence, they were the supreme voice of authority - not that many fey paid all that much attention to authority, but here and there it counted.

For example, using the authority of the Fairy Queen as the ruler of the preserve they could take cuttings from that magic hedge around her shrine and plant those (dosed with Everlasting forms of that plant protection potion for added good measure) around Harry's collected farms.

To his surprise, this totaled over 40,000 acres of landed property. To circle it around with a copy of the Fairy Queen's protective hedge was an immense undertaking, even when dozens of species of brownies and sprites appeared out of nowhere to volunteer their help.

Sadly, they couldn't do the same for Godric's Hollow because that hedge was so good at keeping out questionable characters that most town residents, being normal people, would be hedged out of their homes most of the time.

Selective security can be too selective sometimes.

Given that the newly hedged area was probably a great deal more protected than being a snow globe in his pockets, especially now that the Headmaster no longer had a phoenix that could flame-transport him past wards or this marvelous hedge, Harry deposited several houses his family had owned onto various parts of the collected farms.

He did this to avoid the 'all your eggs in one basket' problem as much as anything. If he was lucky, the whole thing should even be overlooked during the upcoming wars. It wasn't like he was planning much traffic there.

Then, Luna suggested they steal most if not all of the Forbidden Forest to add it to Harry's lands and properties - since they WERE the voice of the Fairy Queen, and thus just about the only authority that COULD claim rightful ownership of large tracts of that place.

Harry's jaw spent some time waving around loosely after that suggestion.

Luna simply smiled serenely.

"For that matter," Hermione blinked, coming to grips with the suggestion, "we could form another hunt to take care of all of the dark creature menace there, just like you said people used to. Lead off with a march of the wooden soldiers to kill off as much of the acromantula menace as possible, then follow with wizards and centaurs, and at least drive those evil things out - or into parts of the forest we're not taking, anyway."

Luna nodded firmly. "A March of the Wooden Soldiers has been a Lovegood family tradition ever since we lived in Toyland."

Harry suppressed the urge to groan. "You know, one of these days I am going to go mad listening to your family history. The problem is, I don't know that I'm going to notice."

The blonde girl shrugged, unconcerned. "No. But it will help you fit in at family reunions better."

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Author's Notes:

Wow! I didn't even get around to including Susan in this episode. Oh well, her entrance will come when it comes.

And now you know the connection between Fawkes and the scar detailing the Underground, because between them Dumbledore had a perfect system for the transportation and storage of a vast amount of goods - the basis for his immense fortune, and that wealth also served as the source for his influence and political power, gradually leading to his control of everything.

Thus, the Rise of Dumbledore explained in a nutshell. And I have to wonder, has anyone else bothered to explain just how it is that man came to hold effectively all power in their world? I mean, beyond the simple 'oh, and he defeated Grindelwald.'

Because if it was that easy, Malfoy could have claimed to have been behind the defeat of Voldemort, and if he got his story out there soon enough, he could've replaced Dumbles as the man with all power in their world.

Chapter Fifty-Two

by Lionheart

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Harry Potter grounded the staff surmounted with an empty crystal in the last of his farms, spoke the incantation, and watched the surrounding lands, houses, forests, trees, and even livestock being soaked up like they were all a painting on a puddle that was being drawn back up a hose.

Luna watching this happily, before adding dreamily, "We should take an old, abandoned military base and add it to the rest."

"Can't do it." The boy relaxed his stance, wiping his brow. "These staffs only work to collect property the user is the legal or rightful owner of. They are made that way as the only means of preventing theft on a grand scale."

Luna blinked at him. "There has to be a loophole somewhere, as the Twinkling Tyrant used this for exactly that, robbing families of their inheritances."

Harry made a grimace. "Yes, but that 'legal owner' bit IS the loophole! Albus has more authority than anyone else would know what to do with, and one power governments are always careful to give themselves is the ability to seize property. So, with his many offices, he can go to the site of something he thinks can disappear without anyone noticing, declare this land or house or whatever seized in the name of the Ministry (he has the appropriate office to do that, I checked) and then turn around and grant it to himself, also in the name of the Ministry. Those sorts of legalized acts of plunder are hallmarks of the worst sorts of governments, but they all have the power. And the only way to get what was stolen back is to appeal to the government - but with everyone there dead, the survivors, if any, too young to do anything, and most everyone else assuming those places were destroyed, there was no one to make such appeals. And, provided he seals the records on his authority as another office he holds, no one can look up the tracks afterwards. Not even the Ministry knows it was being used as a tool to rob victims of the war."

"So Dumbledore legally owns all of those properties he stole?" Hermione looked scandalized.

Harry shook his head. "No. He had no legitimate reason to do what he was doing. It was all abuse of power of the worst sort, and highly secretive at that. None of the Old Families would've left those seizures unchallenged, as they don't want their own properties stolen. Just like with the monopolies, if it is too easy to take them away, anyone could lose everything. He holds them on the flimsiest of pretexts, basically only because no one has looked. They don't have any idea what he is doing. And since the review process and so on has never happened, he is basically holding them illegally. Just like with Sirius, a government can keep a man without a trial for only a short while, and to keep him any longer is, itself, an illegal act."

"But, by that time he already had those properties stored," Hermione saw.

"Yes, exactly," Harry agreed.

Luna cocked her head oddly. "But since the Forbidden Forest was created to be a magical creature preserve, we, who act in the name of a leader of those creatures, could go about grabbing large portions of it - including the Clearing with the Fairy Shrine."

"We might have to get agreement from the centaur tribes for some," Harry acquiesced, "As major portions could be considered owned by those who lived there. But that would only extend to those who had a RIGHT to live there by the original charter, so none of the dark creatures could have any claims."

"And we could include it in that area now being covered by our new hedge!" his favorite bookworm exclaimed brightly, referring to the incomplete project of duplicating the fairy shrine's protective hedge around Harry's farms.

Luna blinked slowly. "I'm still not sure I understand how you are doing that, as the bushes did not bear any seeds..."

Hermione shrugged brightly. "Muggles have a technique where they take cuttings of a plant and grow new plants from them. It is most commonly used for the propagation of trees and shrubs grown commercially. But what they are essentially doing is cloning the plant they take stock from, as all of the 'offspring' of this method are identical genetically to the original. It was fairly simple, actually, to accomplish the same, accelerated with magic."

Luna stared off into the distance. "Maybe Trelawney needs to have trees in each Potter residence, so she can visit? It would be a nice addition to each foyer. An added benefit is that they would make nice perches for Hedwig."

Hermione's eyes grew wide and she turned on Harry in excitement. "Harry! All cuttings are still living tissue of the original plant. It could WORK!"

"Or we might get a million Trelawneys," Luna mused thoughtfully.

Harry pursed his lips in thought. "Either way, that could be fun. And we could be turning the otherwise vacant Potter lands into minor creature preserves and fairy sanctuaries, like the Forbidden Forest only on a smaller scale."

Hermione had paused in thought. "You know, most villages line their streets with trees. We could do that to Godric's Hollow, only EVERY tree could be one of Trelawney's! Having dozens of 'true' trees, she'd be unkillable!"

"And dryads can 'zap' to their tree instantly and untraceably, from any amount of distance," Luna added softly, before meeting their eyes. "If we scattered her trees about at important locations we are likely to be at, she'd be a perfect messenger for secure communications."

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Dumbledore stared morosely at the empty crop fields before him.

On his way back from talking to Moody (who'd accepted the assignment with a certain amount of glee - that man liked killing, and

didn't get to do nearly enough of it to his way of thinking), the Headmaster had felt it wise to stop by those farms he controlled and order the harvest to begin. It had come to the appropriate time, after all.

Only to find that all of the fields, orchards and vineyards he controlled had already been harvested. Indeed, more than simply harvested, stripped bare.

Releasing one hand from the sleek, black cane he leaned on, the distinguished gentleman in black frock coat reached up under his top hat to where he no longer wore glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

This was so tiresome!

Well, it would not be the first time some arrogant young thing had burned his fields just before harvest, trying to drive him out of business and retake an inheritance the Headmaster had stolen fair and square. Dumbledore would just declare another instance of Dragon Blight had soured the crops, and buy all the food he needed to fill his contracts from the muggle world - again. The magical world would notice the drop in taste quality, but they'd forgive him under the excuse of the mysterious Dragon Blight - A made-up disease he'd invented in times past to cover exactly this sort of circumstance.

Thankfully it was illegal for anyone BUT him to buy food from muggles on a commercial scale. Couldn't have the sheep escaping their pen, after all.

And, once more, he'd be forced to buy surplus crops from another magical nation in order to have the high quality of food required to fill his royal contracts and retain his influence over the muggle government and queen.

It wasn't the first time this had happened. Nor, he suspected, would it be the last. Every so often some child decided to reclaim his family legacy, having learned about it from who-knows-where (Dumbledore had been careful to eliminate all traces of such hints from the

Hogwarts curriculum), and tried something like this. It was just an inconvenient time for it to happen.

Just another instance of his current Bad Luck, he suspected; although now he'd have to track down the child who did this and terminate him or her, just to put an end to this occurrence of the problem and stop it before it spread.

Idly, he twirled the end of his long mustache, already plotting out who to send out letters to to correct this minor inconvenience; unaware that, due to the Fidelius Harry had put over his combined properties, he had forgotten all about checking those portions of his total stolen holdings. The Potter family farm properties simply never entered his mind anymore.

Just like a Fidelius should operate.

Realizing that he would need to fill an ink order soon, Dumbledore went off to the Hogwarts lake to milk his giant squid there, only to discover the animal missing - it was no longer there!

He spent a moment gaping, feeling like a man who'd been kicked in the nuts. No one had EVER thought to attack his own family business before! It was a completely new sensation to have his own inheritance and livelihood stolen.

He could not defend those laws rendering it illegal to buy ink from anyone but him if he could not provide any ink to sell. And buying replacement stock...

The Headmaster paled, as no other source in the world used a giant squid as he did, and he'd supplied all of the ink to magical Europe! There was no way to simply import replacements and pass it off as his own, like he was doing with food, as every other producer supplied their own distinct recipes. None of their products could be mistaken for his, not even under heavy charms! And, many of his biggest customers relied upon the special properties of his ink, just like a dragon's tongue had different magical properties than a bezoar!

Not to mention he'd handled so much volume that no other ink seller would be able to simply pick up his slack. He'd provided a sizable chunk of the global magical market for inks. It wasn't like he could simply Confound a few people to not notice. The ink had to be there or he'd lose this market!

And it would be months before he could create an industry capable of making enough ink to supply his customer's demands the normal way - even longer if he tried to replace the squid, as for nearly two centuries he'd been hiring boats to go out and slaughter giant squid so no one else could do as he'd done and catch one to supply their ink that way.

The race was nearly extinct due to his market protection scheme.

Suddenly the Headmaster realized that, no longer able to supply all his needs off the revenue he got from smuggling - since he no longer had a phoenix to use for that, and no alternative to fall back on to replace it, he was forced to rely on his businesses for the majority of his income. And quite a few of those businesses were in crisis or failing - even his farms would be providing little to no profit to him this year, due to having to buy replacement crops.

Accustomed as he was to limitless wealth, the man saw the end of life as he knew it approaching and realized just how deeply this Dark Colonel had been striking into his interests.

Grumbling, the man went to go activate more of his servants. He'd resisted this for the longest time. When everything was smooth sailing he had needed so very little in the way of support for running all that he had put under his heel. But he simply did not have the TIME to deal with everything just now! It was now a crisis of growing proportions, and he would have to hire business managers to see to his vast estates to ensure they ran a profit.

It irked him. He disliked ceding control of anything to anybody, and positively hated the idea of letting people know just how much he controlled. But like his Deputy Headmistress ran the school for him, it was time to acquire additional under-managers and begin delegating

more of what he could no longer see to himself, lest the whole thing go down in flames.

It was also high time, he decided, to contact Dung to get a few of his shadier acquaintances together so the Headmaster could generously allow them to go fairy hunting in the Forbidden Forest. They'd leave a few hundred dead. Hagrid would collect them, and turn them over to him. Dumbledore could then use their wings to construct for himself a Time Turner or two. He would have done this long ago, except that he'd been distracted by the various Prophet articles, then the follow-up disasters, then finally waiting for a break in the emergencies so he could catch his breath.

Well, no more waiting. It was past time to begin to deal with these events more aggressively. After all, hadn't the false-Trelawney given him the clue herself? As the spider he was doomed to fall to the chicken. His answer now was the same it had been then: It was time for him to become the wolf.

Rubbing his hands together, Dumbledore cackled, swirling his black cape as he departed.

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Hermione was laughing, cuddling her dragon close while telling Luna brightly, "Cuddle Companions are a cute concept. It also makes a lot of sense. Distance between lovers, siblings, children and parents, etc, is a real problem. And they would get a lot of use from firsties, you would think."

Harry had to agree. Personally, he was ecstatic that he could cuddle his own dragon and feel the love those two girls had for him. It was awesome! And, he thought, something he could quickly get accustomed to.

In fact, the idea of this continuing all his life long was very appealing.

Hermione laughed at something Luna said, but Harry just basked in the glow coming off the two of them, for the first time in his life feeling secure.

'Yep,' Harry reflected. 'Dumbledore had lost what had to have been one of his most loyal and devoted followers - because Hermione's whole character was built around loyalty and devotion.'

'Well, knowledge and learning, too. She was nice like that.'

That caused him to wonder about her bravery, because... Wow! To have eclipsed those other two qualities... he couldn't find words for it.

The Fairy Trio were just returning from repairing and shoring up the roof on that one collapsed secret passage tunnel out of Hogwarts. Nobody monitored it since it had been collapsed since forever, so it became the perfect secret entrance in and out. All it had needed was a bit of repairs.

Of course, those repairs were beyond the capabilities of most Hogwarts students, and the staff had little to no interest in restoring it. Frankly, they saw the castle as it was and never really thought of changing it.

Odd. The trio just called it one of those wizarding blind spots and moved on.

It being a Normal Day, (the only day they could do work in the castle without fear of tipping off Dumbledore) they recovered the tunnel in the very early morning on their way back from their workout by the lake.

Firenze had become strictly nocturnal in the last little while, staying up all night long to train the trio of teenagers, acting as their fitness instructor as they sleepwalked through their routines under his direction.

The routines themselves were only a couple of hours long apiece, but he had to oversee three sets of them each night, one for each repeated day. It had left the centaur sleeping during his days and working all nights, as he did not have the use of a Time Turner - they couldn't trust too many of those out, and the centaur lived just too close to Hogwarts not to fear an accident that might lead to exposure.

Overseen by a centaur, the workouts they were getting were quite effectual. They started with some of the more beneficial exercises worked out in the Greek Gymnasiums, followed by an hour swimming in the lake using gillyweed providing excellent full body workouts, quite often working in some sports.

That had potential to be very unfortunate, as the Greeks worked out in the nude, and wrestling was one of their primary sports.

This did not bother Firenze. Centaurs typically wore no clothing even on their human half. However, thankfully, England was a great deal colder than Greece was, so naked wrestling between Harry and his girls had to be canceled on account of they'd freeze their bits off. It was fall in Scotland, and not a good time for running around without your clothes on in the middle of the night.

So, no naked wrestling for the Fey Trio. Although Luna pouted, Hermione cut her off before she could suggest warming charms.

A good thing, too, as it would've caused more problems than could easily be described. Also, the centaur just didn't have the budget for importing the massive amounts of olive oil that were a Greek athlete's only covering - and Harry had NO intention of fronting the money!

There was a time and place for all things, and he wanted any contact of that nature to be in an atmosphere of privacy and intimacy to foster the tender gentleness he felt such a situation deserved - not the combative air of a no holds barred, hair pulling wrestling match out in the middle of a lawn!

And that wasn't an idle fear. Anciently, the Spartans had withdrawn their Olympic team in protest when eye-gouging and biting got disallowed from wrestling tournaments. And that seemed exactly the wrong way to get introduced to a girl's intimate parts.

Heck, that seemed the wrong way to treat each other, period, so they did all their wrestling with large transfigured dolls animated for that purpose, as Harry had no intention of treating them that roughly.

Of course, there were some who'd probably get off on it.

Case in point, Bellatrix met them as they returned from their workout, with a stack of towels in her hands, one of which she immediately put to use on Harry's wild and unruly hair. "Oh-h-h Master! I made you snacks and a protein shake to help get your body nice and strong and supple."

The others tried to ignore her perverted giggling.

Bellatrix had replaced Madam Pince, the Hogwarts Librarian, to be close to her Lord, although she spent most of her mornings lately drooling over Harry after his workouts. Someday soon she'd even be liable to join them in those, the way things were going, just to get more perverted leering material in on her beloved master.

Luna leaned close to Hermione to whisper, "It will be sad when we finally have to put her down, because she's adorable in a sick, disturbing sort of way."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Speaking of adults and children, after what you did to Paddy it's a wonder he doesn't wanna keep you for himself! Although, he IS getting along rather well with Amelia, and it would be cute if the first pair of knickers he ever stole ended up belonging to his future wife."

Luna giggled and skipped off to the VIP quarters they were still sharing, having preferred them to staying in the regular dorms (and no authority figure had tried to kick them out yet).

The other two followed moments later, eager to change and get ready for the day; although when Harry walked in to his VIP bedroom he saw a plate sitting on his side table with a pair of lacy white knickers lying on it, and a sign on a stick, reading, "Steal Me."

Harry picked them up, after checking for wards or curses, and the moment he did so fireworks went off, streamers appeared and a camera bulb flashed. Luna appeared wearing a party hat, strategically placed wrapping paper with ribbons tied in bows, and nothing else.

"You know," he remarked, fighting a smile and trying to sound sardonic, and only failing just a little, sounding a wee bit amused. "That outfit would be a lot more effective if you were older than twelve, or if I weren't only thirteen."

The blonde girl shrugged, saying, "Hermione only just reminded me of Sirius, who as much as demanded that I do this in order to earn my engagement to you - a Potter family tradition, and all."

Hermione, who had been about to barge in the door, noted this to herself, then barged in openly. "Alright, you two, no horsing around! We've got visitors today, so be sure to be ready on time!"

The other two scattered to their baths and dressing. Hermione looked down at the note and smirked. "A Potter family tradition, eh?" and then she went on her own way.

"Who is our first guest?" Luna asked as they all got together and she was drying her hair with a few deft wand flicks.

Resolving to learn that charm herself, Hermione was about to answer when a polite knock sounded at the door and they all scrambled to get the last bits of everything taken care of.

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"Well, I'm glad that's over with. Birthdays are always stressful for me."

Both her immediate friends looked on her in concern. "Why is that?" Luna asked, puzzled. "Don't you like your birthday?"

"It's not that." Hermione shook her head, hair waving. "One of my uncles is always there to tease me about a muggle holiday held on the same day."

"Really? I can't think of one," Harry, too, was puzzled.

The bushy haired girl sighed, blowing her locks up out of her face. "Really, it's no big deal."

"So, why don't you like your birthdays?" Luna queried.

Seeing she'd either have to tell the truth or make something up, Hermione gave in to the inevitable. "Alright, he always shows up in costume and using this horrible accent, doing his best to embarrass me! I hate when people use a language I can't understand!"

"You weren't born on Halloween," Luna shook her head, objecting.

"It's not that." Hermione drooped her head, resigned.

"So what holiday is September 19th?" Harry wondered aloud to her.

Once more the girl sighed. "Alright, he dresses up and talks like a pirate. September 19th is International Talk Like A Pirate Day. Seamen in the days of sail (as well as today) spoke a language so full of technical jargon as to be nearly incomprehensible to a landsman, and my uncle enjoys it. So, now you know the shameful truth. I was born on International Talk Like A Pirate Day."

Luna gaped, while Harry snorted with surprised laughter.

"Muggles actually have holidays like that?" the blonde asked, confused.

"Well, it's not a major celebration," the bookworm temporized. "But it's there."

"You know," Harry wondered in playful thought, "that could be a good idea. It sounds more fun than most holidays. A pity we didn't celebrate it."

He suddenly spied Susan sitting at the breakfast table surrounded by other Puffs, and was off, plopping down beside the blonde Hufflepuff he was now engaged to, throwing an arm across her shoulders to pull her tight, and proclaiming aloud to her before the table at large, "Arrr! Me Beauty! Avast, there! Iff'n you aren't a plunder worth the taking, eh? No Spanish galleon ever had as sweet a booty as ye, my dear!"

Slashing a squinty glare across the startled table, he declared, "An I'll keelhaul the lily livered louse as what sez otherwise!"

Then, to the astonishment of all, he bent her over backwards so she was dangling off the bench, helpless without him to hold her up, he planted a great big kiss on her, thoroughly enjoying making the scene.

Then, when he was done, the boy righted her, only to discover the girl was too shocked to stay upright on her own. So, swinging her up over his shoulder like a bag of loot, he made a squinty-eyed, peg-leg style walk away from the table, carrying her off without so much as a backwards glance.

After they were about halfway to the Gryffindor table, he declared to the suddenly stirring Susan, "Oh, by the way, did you know your legal guardian just engaged you to me?"

The girl fainted on the spot.

Taking compassion on the poor girl, Hermione flicked her wand under the table where she was waiting for Harry, reversing the Obliviate performed on Susan the day they'd all tried to escape from Hogwarts.

At least this way she'd know what heroic deed she'd been engaged for. To her immense surprise, this woke the loyal girl up; and, to the startlement of the entire house, she wriggled about in Harry's arms to plant a deep kiss on him.

"Well, she's enthusiastic," Luna calmly began to fill her plate with food, the stuff imported from outside by Dobby riding a smuggling dodo.

All across the table, folks were drooling over the food surrounding the Fey Trio. But there was a ward line around them preventing anyone from getting at it. Only now Susan was brought to share the feast.

Smoldering slightly from his latest attempt to grab the good stuff, Ron glared hatefully at his former friends as they sat down to enjoy it.

"Hey, Harry! Why don't you let your real friends in on the good stuff?" he shouted, elbowing Sean and Dean, who quickly nodded along with him.

"I am with my real friends, Weasley," Harry answered, right before Luna elbowed him. Then he looked up and, placing Susan aside (to her great disappointment) stood up and apologized. "I'm so sorry. Neville, would you care to join us?"

Neville did, moving quickly. Harry then took pity on the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team and invited them as well. Noting a few absences, he said to his girlfriends, "After this, we ought to go to the Hospital Wing to check in on Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell. I hear they're still in there."

Soberly, the two girls nodded, followed by Susan a moment later.

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Author's Notes:

I always liked International Talk Like A Pirate Day, and am a bit curious as to why so few have connected the facts that it falls on Hermione's birthday.

Oh well. More fun for me, I guess.

And, I'll wager a guess that no one predicted my Harry approaching Susan like that.

Anyway, for those who are curious, check out the wikipedia article on International Talk Like A Pirate Day. It matches up with what I'd learned from other sources. Or you can google their homepage. This site doesn't allow URLs or I'd post a direct link.

Chapter Fifty-Three
by Lionheart

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Narcissa, cast out of her family and divorced, had been seeking for some time to make an appearance at Hogwarts to appeal to both Heads of the Black and Darling (formerly Malfoy) families to be let back in and granted a name and support.

Her circumstances in life depended on it, and the concession was a vital one. With Lucius dead both she and Draco were bereft of support. And though he was now legally a bastard, her marriage having been dissolved retroactively so Draco had no legal father, she still owed him what help she could provide.

And that was a major concern, as Draco had been hospitalized due to some accident she didn't quite grasp - after all, one could formerly count on all dangerous incidents at school happening only to those of lesser breeding.

What she did not know was the Confundus under which Snape tortured Draco had been programmed to wear off just as the poor unfortunate subject died, for the direct purpose of seeing Snape realize just what he had done, right after it was too late to do anything to stop or reverse it.

Dobby had gotten them a great Polaroid of his face with an expression like unto a man who realized that meal he'd been eating so eagerly was dung - part shame, part revulsion, and a large measure of horror.

The vomiting afterwards had been the same.

Naturally the first thing the greasy professor had done after voiding his stomach was check the body on the faint hope that it wasn't really dead yet, and unfortunately the little brat hadn't been quite dead; near enough to grant that impression, briefly, but on examination not fully gone yet. And so a quick rush to the Hospital Wing, then a transferal

to St. Mungo's when the facilities at school proved insufficient, had so far saved the boy's life.

What Narcissa DID know was that somehow she was going to have to pay for her child's medical expenses; and, as she owned nothing else, was determined to get some official family support so she didn't have to rent herself out as a prostitute to whomever could pay.

Quite a fall from grace for the pureblood queen.

Officially, since this had occurred on school grounds during the school year it was the school's problem and they ought to pay for it. But good luck getting Albus to do something he didn't want to do; and he hadn't volunteered yet, so was unlikely to in the future. And she didn't have the money to get the right lawyers who might have a chance to drag him to court to force him. Those types of lawyers cost more than the medical treatment anyway.

So it would be back to the prostitution option, or getting a family's backing.

Always having been raised in the midst of wealth and privilege, having been surrounded by powerful family members who could accomplish whatever they wanted, Narcissa did not have a good idea of how any other person lived their life - and these last two weeks had been a very unwelcome lesson. At least her sister Andromeda had taken her in, allowing her to stay in Nymphadora's room while her daughter was at auror school. Otherwise she would've had no place to live!

And, while Bellatrix had offered to let her stay at Grimmauld Place, her old family home had fallen into ruin and disrepair, and it was frankly filthy, not to mention those muggles constantly screaming in the basement and the insane elf who bumbled instructions so badly he was more harm than good. So, while it had been a distinct step down for the pureblood princess to go stay in a humble muggle home with the Tonks family, at least it had been clean.

But Andromeda had been clear that her sister could only stay there while her daughter was in school, so the arrangement was strictly

temporary. The house was small and they couldn't afford to let her stay long term.

Her only option at that point would be the filthy horror that was Grimmauld Place, the elf who was as apt to poison her unwittingly as serve her tea, and those muggles screaming in the basement at all hours. Not to mention the question of what she was to do for food in that all-but-abandoned property!

And that was all strictly for herself. If she had to take Draco home to that place, still wounded due to incomplete medical treatments that she could not afford (and were presently piling up debts), her child would surely die!

Given that motivation, Narcissa had, a bit indiscreetly, simply skipped the authorization process that had been taking so long for Dumbledore to approve and appeared at Hogwarts to make a plea to both heads of families she might have the most hope of gaining support from. Neither child had any reason to hate her, and she did have cases for proving her relations to them. From there she could play up on the bonds of kin.

Then she entered that room and found three stony faces.

Narcissa saw at once that the plea she had hoped to make had already failed before she'd even set foot in their room. The dignified and elegant lady gave way to the fear and panic she'd been papering over (hoping to make a good impression) and threw herself prostrate on the floor, grabbing Harry's knees as she pled, spouting enough tears to wet his ankles.

"PLEASE, my lord!" Deciding to act on a hint from not long ago when Bellatrix stopped by her house directly after her escape from Azkaban - the note stating that this boy was to be the new vessel of the Dark Lord, Narcissa adopted a tack she knew would appeal to Voldemort. "Torture me if you like. I beg of you to enjoy my pain and screams. But do not let me descend to the level of a base whore! My financial situation is desperate, and I need your support that my life and my line may continue!"

Harry glanced away, suddenly ashamed. This was something Tom Riddle would have enjoyed, purebloods abasing themselves to find favor with him. What he did not know was that Narcissa had chosen that route precisely because it would've appealed to Voldemort, whom she thought he was, and she truly was desperate enough to accept exactly what she'd only just proposed.

Hermione was horrified as well, but Luna simply bent down and began to play with Narcissa's hair, bouncing the locks as would a child. Stroking a finger down the side of the woman's face, she asked, "It would seem a shame to mar this with scars. Why would you want that?"

A quick glance assured the former Black princess that Harry wasn't as interested in her debasement as the Dark Lord would've been. That caused her no relief, only concern. Had she played wrongly? "It is for my lord to decide whatever he wants done with me. I bow to whatever he demands."

"Up!" Luna declared, tapping her on the shoulder.

And, seeing as how Harry did not correct or overrule her, Narcissa obeyed.

Leading her behind a changing screen, as old houses (which described magical living fairly well) tended to have, Luna commanded again, "Strip!"

Once again, on seeing Harry not object or correct, Narcissa obeyed, shedding clothes quickly until she stood as bare as though for a shower, acknowledging silently in her own mind it was the first time she'd been like this in front of anyone since her last shower among the girls at their dorm in Slytherin.

Hermione, who'd opened her mouth in horror and begun to object, caught this thought as she read it from the woman's mind with her growing powers of passive Legilimency, and instantly her concern shifted focus and she joined Luna, who was conducting a careful search for Dark Marks.

Harry, having the memories of the man who gave them, knew she did not have one, so stayed safely on the other side of that screen where he could not see anything below the woman's shoulders.

Actually, figuring they didn't need him for this, Harry got up to go. However Hermione noted certain other details, then commanded firmly, "Harry, don't you dare walk away from this conversation!"

The boy stared at her, shocked. Hermione gestured over to where Luna was having Narcissa turn slowly for her inspection. "You're not seeing anything inappropriate from over there, Harry. Besides, even if you did I'm not sure it would be wrong. She's yours now, just like Bellatrix. She wants to be yours, and I'm sure you can find some use for her - one better than torturing or debasing her, anyway."

Seeing he remained in confusion, the bookworm rolled her eyes. "HARRY! We DO need allies, and here is one volunteering! I don't know that we can afford to turn her away."

Luna spoke calmly from where she was examining the bottom of Narcissa's left foot, wanting to be VERY thorough in her inspection, due to how much harm traitors had done in the last war, "Besides, we are already expanding beyond the threesome. With the small population of Fae and Fairy, it might even be considered necessary to our mission."

The boy's eyes suddenly lit up in understanding, a look that was cheerfully mirrored on Luna's face, who offered, smiling, "You also HAVE to consider, she was never a real wife in the muggle sense."

Seeing the story painted in the thoughts behind Narcissa's puzzled eyes, Hermione winced in sympathy, before explaining in gentle tones to Harry (who'd been trying his best not to look anywhere near the woman), "Harry, evil people do not care for others. The selfishness they show in everything makes that impossible! They care for themselves only. That makes the kind of marriage most people consider normal, where the spouses love each other and their children, impossible. At best they can only pretend. Selfishness is all about 'Me, Me, Me' while true love is all about sacrifice and putting others first - to the extent you are filled with one you are blocked from

having the other, and Lucius was an extremely selfish man! It defined his existence!"

"How was Draco born, then?" Harry shot back, thinking he was clever.

Since it was he who asked the question, Narcissa hurried to answer, "I gave a potion ingredient drawn from a certain portion of my body. Lucius gave another. Then we had a muggleborn woman go through the pregnancy for us."

Luna knew that from what she knew of pureblood culture. Having virgins about was important for a wide assortment of ritual magics. Hermione knew it from having seen the lack of certain changes to a woman's figure wrought by having a pregnancy. But still she thought the very concept disgusting.

Harry hadn't a clue, Voldemort having cared nothing for such things.

Seeing his confusion, the pureblood witch tried to explain, "The population of witches and wizards is so low all contraceptive charms, spells or potions are massively illegal, not just to use but to teach or invent. Casting a castration hex is punishable by ten years forced pregnancy, along with a permanent gender change if you weren't female at the time you cast it. Books with such spells are banned, for good reason. We are already a dying race. We don't need to accelerate that process any more than it already is by our internal wars and things. Our society needs all the children it can get."

Seeing by his confusion the delicate approach hadn't worked, she tried again.

"Perhaps I could put it this way: Barring birth control or accident, husbands who are interested in their wives do more than have an heir and stop there. Even the muggle aristocracy have an heir and a spare, and that is using those contraceptives that are terribly illegal among us. No? Well then allow me to spell it out in gory detail: Lucius had an unhealthy interest in little boys, and belonged to a social club whose motto is: 'Sex by eight, it's too late'. Rabastan and Rodolphus are senior members."

Narcissa gave them all a very direct look. "All three of them were far more interested in Draco than they ever were in me or Bellatrix."

Harry's jaw now hung open, gaping in disgusted astonishment.

Once again, Tom Riddle had cared nothing for those things. Having sacrificed his own sex organs in a dark ritual to make him ageless, he'd ignored entire facets of pureblood culture. Anything related to sex and dynasties, really, and Harry was really beginning to keenly feel those gaps in knowledge.

Luna snorted mirthfully. "Dumbledore may have founded the local chapter."

Narcissa shrugged, feeling progress by what she'd judged of his expressions. "It's possible. I know they socialized with him at those events."

"No birth control at all?" Hermione asked, eyes round, thinking of all the children that could lead to. But then, children weren't a bad thing...

The pureblood witch standing there in all her naked glory behind the changing screen shrugged, eying Harry out of the corner of her eye to judge his reaction while she answered this young little Miss' question, "There are such spells and potions available, of course. Being illegal has never stopped certain families. If anything that is a draw to some of them." She delicately did not state that two of those families were represented by their heads standing before her, as she had no clue as yet as to whether or not they'd choose to continue those policies of gleefully disobeying laws just because they could. "From what I understand the longer they are used the harder they are to reverse, leading to permanent sterility after not much time on them. Entire families died out learning that. Still, as I'd said, some enjoy it just because it is forbidden. But frankly Lucius had no interest in women for the lure of the forbidden to fan. His desires lay more in causing death and collecting power than in creating life - and he was an ideal most pureblood men aspire to."

Having finally gotten the message, Harry nodded soberly.

"Well," Luna chirruped brightly, having found no marks despite an inspection a gynecologist could be proud of, "the first thing we'll be interested in is Draco having one of those permanent gender changes you spoke of. We'll agree to cover his medical expenses if you, as his guardian, sign for that."

"Of course," Narcissa agreed demurely, sensing victory. Better her child be alive than anything else; and paying those bills was impossible for her without their support; so whatever their reasons, they had power to make demands. And she would obey them.

Seeing the other two stare at her, Luna giggled brightly. "What? It's the only thing left to take from him to reduce his status among pureblood wizards. As you just heard, they have little use for witches. Not having a name, wealth or a family to call his own, his gender is the only thing left to take away!"

Turning to explain to Narcissa, she said, "Your ponce of a son has been our nemesis since we first came to this school, never missing an opportunity to insult, assault or belittle us. We see this as a necessary act of revenge."

Narcissa silently cursed her child. Far be it from a pureblood queen to get in the way of revenge for someone more powerful than her when she needed their support for her own sake. Besides, they'd never been close. Draco had always idolized his father, so was more his child than hers anyway.

Pureblood witches had learned to be good about sacrificing anything to those in power if they wanted to keep their comfortable lifestyles. She had put up with Lucius being a Death Eater, and had been willing to accept Voldemort's torture of her person in order to maintain her standard of living.

This was nothing by comparison.

Draco had chosen his enemies, and she needed those same people as allies right now - Perhaps forever, as she didn't want any other life than to be part of a powerful family, and these two were her only real opportunity for that.

Still, what was left of her maternal instinct satisfied herself that at least Draco would live. His medical bills would be paid for. And if Draco was going to become a girl in exchange, well, at least he would be alive.

There was so much else worse that they could do to him.

Hermione had been concentrating all this time, running through ideas in her head. Considering all of the times Draco'd made derogatory remarks to her about being a 'mudblood whore', and figuring out what his probable use for that sort of person had been after hearing his mother's story about hiring muggleborns to go through pregnancy on her behalf, Hermione acquired a nasty smirk of her own. "You know, perhaps we should consider taking poor little Draca" (feminine of Draco, she knew her Latin) "back into the fold - just long enough to give her a dowry and arrange for her to be engaged to both Crabbe and Goyle? Provided we get a contract stating that she bears all her own children, of course."

"She'd have to bear at least a dozen," Luna nodded, agreeing with the sentiment fervently. "By each."

"Nurse them, too," the bookworm added, noting by the lack of signs that was another thing the woman standing there nude had not done.

"Of course," Narcissa nodded regally. It would land her offspring among a pureblood household or two, which was the only life Draco had ever known - the only one he was suited for, really. It would require some adjustments, but better, (to her mind) than living on the streets, which was the alternative. If that was the best thing she could do for him, at least it wasn't so bad.

Life and home. No, they were being quite generous to Draca, really. Offering a future to one of their enemies? These people were being kind to a fault, by the standards of her culture.

That spoke well for her own future among them.

Satisfied that she had done her best, Narcissa released her conscience from its last hold on her stranger of a son and accepted that her daughter would have, if not a good life, then at least a tolerable one.

Draco might have different ideas, of course.

Luna was already counting up the PR benefits of having 'done so much to advance the pureblood cause', and 'made such a sacrifice to guarantee the continuation of pureblood lines', by transforming Draco into a baby factory to two of the roughest and ugliest (but purest!) boys at school.

Almost better revenge than having killed him, really.

The Luna frowned softly, stating, "We're going to have to juggle some legal hoops in order to make Draca non-inheritable, take her in as a ward instead of a child, just so she doesn't get any ideas about assassinating me again."

Narcissa grew VERY still, suppressing a shudder as she silently cast her child off. She NEEDED these benefactors!! And wasn't about to tie herself to a sinking ship. Failed assassinations were taken VERY poorly among purebloods, and whatever Lucius' child got, the little brat deserved.

Frankly, she counted it a miracle they'd be willing to pay her medical bills, and whatever they wanted to do to Draca in return, well, it was deserved. Lucius would have terminated the boy himself for having failed, if he were still alive, even if he hadn't been the target. Failed assassinations were Very Bad Form!

Narcissa was enough of a pureblood to cast off family as required, and in this case it was definitely required! Draca was on her own from now on! In fact, she had to make this position clear to her new benefactors so they didn't entertain any doubts as to her loyalties, so Narcissa offered, "There is a breeder contract that would suit just fine, similar to the one we used to spawn the beast actually. Draca herself would have no status as part of any family, a hired maid basically, but

her children would be Crabbes and Goyles. Is that what you're after? Her wages could be set quite low."

"Perfect!" Both Luna and Hermione declared in unison.

Harry looked green around the gills. He raised a finger, "All that aside, what about Narcissa here? What place do we have for her?"

Voldemort had not been particularly impressed with pureblood loyalties. Strictly speaking, they didn't have any. Most of them would stay bought so long as you were the best deal they'd been offered, but that was as far as they'd extend loyalty, even for family members.

Case in point: Here was Narcissa casting off her own child, rather than going to someone else for her money. Not that she had a great deal of chance with any of the other rich families, but there were people who'd live in a shipping crate on the street rather than part with family. But the purebloods didn't have that sort of loyalty among them.

Harry found it rather hard to trust them, especially considering the number of secrets he had. Not even Tom Riddle had trusted them without a dark mark forcing their cooperation. Purebloods just weren't very trustworthy!

Which explained why they almost never showed up in Hufflepuff House. He considered Susan Bones the exception; but the exception proves the rule - just like Bellatrix' blindly devoted loyalty to him was out of place among purebloods. It stood out because it was unusual. Most Death Eaters were out for the rewards they got for service to the Dark Lord, whether that be plunder or an opportunity to kill. She considered serving him it's own reward.

Narcissa had instantly frozen at his question of 'what place do we have for her', fearing to make a suggestion but intensely interested in the answer. Her own life and future was being decided her now - or if she even HAD a life or a future!

No, naturally she was quite interested, and would do anything to skew the results in her favor, but wasn't certain what to say that could

count in her favor, so remained quiet for now, waiting for one of them to say something that she could hopefully then improve on.

"Sirius would be unhappy if we couldn't do something good for her," Hermione stated authoritatively, inspecting the woman thoughtfully.

The former Malfoy standing there naked behind the screen (they hadn't given her leave to dress yet) silently blessed her sweet hearted Gryffindor cousin, resolving to do something nice to repair that relationship soon.

He was now a valuable ally to have, to her mind.

Luna, having considered the matter well enough to her mind, gave the woman a slap on her bare flank and said, "Alright, I've seen enough. You're hired. I need a Piratical Maid of All-Work."

You see, reading the Quibbler upside-down could get boring, especially when she wrote more than half of it herself. And triple days meant she had so many more odd moments to fill! So she'd taken to reading muggle plays she'd snuck out of Hermione's collection.

And there had been that nice one called The Pirates of Penzance.

"A what?!?" Narcissa blinked, nonplused.

"I need someone to do illegal things for me," Luna calmly explained with a sly smile. "All kinds of things."

"But, hired..." the woman had really wanted to be part of a family.

The blonde Ravenclaw snorted disparagingly. "Being idle is bad for people, and idle rich get into all sorts of nasty hobbies, as I'm sure you're aware - you were just complaining about Uncle Lucy's pastimes. So I want you to show me that you know how to work. If you can show me that you can learn some Hufflepuff qualities, namely hard work and loyalty, I'm willing to accept you as a Darling."

"Well, I guess she was willing to accept disfigurement and torture," Hermione mused thoughtfully. "So she has no excuse to refuse this,

which is far better in my opinion." Firming up, she declared, "I'm with Luna on this. Hard work only improves people, and loyalty is a trait everyone should have. Both would serve you well, if you could learn them."

"Besides," Luna softened into dreamy wistfulness, "Harry has Dobby to work and smuggle things in and out of Hogwarts for him, and it's entirely unfair that he hasn't offered to share. So now I get my own servant. And, if she can prove herself the kind of person I want as family, then later a Darling."

"Sounds eminently reasonable," Harry agreed.

Luna bobbed her head merrily. "And, if things work out, you can take her as a mistress."

Harry's eyes bugged out.

Realizing she was teasing, Hermione flicked a lock of hair out of her face to answer, "By medieval law, and thus of course wizarding laws since they're almost the same, any man who is married is an adult no matter his age - A second way of achieving the freedoms you got as the acting head of the Black family, making both of the means more secure, and less subject to contest of any sort."

Luna continued dreamily, "It need not be spoken that, as an adult, you are far harder for Dumbledore to control. And thus he'd do anything to take that status away from you. You could be the only fifty year old man in full control of his faculties to still be considered a child, if he had anything to say about it. So he's going to do something. We just don't know what. So we'll act first, and he'd have to react immediately in order to stop it; and even then it would cost him a lot to do so."

Narcissa raised a delicately trimmed eyebrow, showing a slight smirk for the first time in their presence. "Not only that, if Dumbledore did go ahead and try, he would be showing everyone that he has the power to do this to them as well. The courts are very careful about setting precedents like that."

Hermione was considering, her sympathy for the pureblood witch overcoming her hesitations. "You know, we should get the marriage of Bellatrix dissolved at the same time."

"Better would be to arrange to have Rabastan and Rodolphus executed, so you can claim those family properties," Narcissa offered, dropping her eyes demurely to the floor.

"You see!" Luna bounced to a standing position, hugging the naked older woman. "I KNEW we needed her! That's my gift, to see needful things. I may not know how to get them, or what they're useful for, but I know what's needed! Our dear Narcissa will take over Lucius' position of political savvy insider helping us from that angle, after swearing Unbreakable Vows of loyalty, of course."

"I live to serve," Narcissa bowed regally in the nude (harder than you'd think).

Luna snorted. "I bet you do."

The bookworm was grinning. "You know," she paused, before blurting out, "Whilst old age and treachery WILL generally trump youth and skill, it WON'T trump youth, skill, experience, an assortment of strange and useful esoteric powers, the advantage of complete and utter surprise and a comprehensive, sustained, ruthless and totally unpredictable campaign which old age and treachery can't foresee, block, evade, strike back at, recover from or even catch a breathing space in. Unfortunately (for Bumbles, anyway), that's exactly what he's in the middle of! And the more people we have to carry on the fight, the better!"

"We can't go to Wizengamot sessions while attending Hogwarts. So we do need a proxy to cast our votes for us; and lacking any other person of our choice, Dumbledore would be our proxy by default. The Headmaster was very careful about that," Harry tentatively agreed in principle to needing a politically savvy insider to the government, and trying desperately to draw them to a practical instead of teasing angle.

He did not have much experience being teased. Growing up as Harry all of the nasty things said to him were meant with real intent, and

Tom Riddle was a bully who hurt people who tried teasing him. So graciously accepting playful jibes meant in fun was one of those areas he was lacking in.

Something Sirius would like to do something about, he felt sure.

"I was someone secure who could listen and act as sounding board for Lucius on all of his schemes," Narcissa kept her eyes on the floor. "While I did not agree with all of them, I am well acquainted with how he exerted his influence on politics. Having accompanied him to formal dinners and dances, I have also met all the right people, and belong to the correct social circles... or would, if only I had a name and home and decent living stipend for wardrobe and such."

Catching a proud twinkle of victory in the witch's downturned eye, Luna gave her a hard slap on her bare flank. "None of that, now!"

"We'll draw up a list of instructions," Hermione offered. "And depending on how well you carry them out... well, promotions are based on performance around here."

Luna nodded firmly, ordering the older woman. "Get dressed. We'll have a list of tasks for you in a moment, along with perks you'll enjoy should you be able to carry them out."

Still behind the changing screen, Narcissa scrambled into her clothes.

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Author's Notes:

This scene actually falls in between the second to last and last scenes of the last chapter, but it just kept growing and growing...

And I also disagree with the sentiment espoused in the Pirates of Penzance that "when a felon's not engaged in his employment he's just the same as any honest man." Being evil twists a person. I have personally witnessed that in real life. And pureblood culture has had a long time to get itself thoroughly twisted.

Review this Story/Chapter

Chapter Fifty-Four by Lionheart

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Darting in a window on the seventh floor, having used their special clothes to go invisible before going into their recently mastered small-fairy forms to fly up ahead, Luna and Hermione reformed before summoning the door. The two girls then quickly began preparing the Room of Requirement as a movie theater to show the poor Bones girl the situation she'd gotten into. Only once they were inside the vanishing room did they become visible once again.

There had been a rushed and hurried debate as to how far or fast the trio ought introduce Susan to the facts of her new relationship and the baggage it brought to her life. But Harry, in the end, said they'd try full disclosure, and he'd also read her mind throughout to see how she was taking it. If Susan did well, that was a major hurdle out of the way. And if she didn't, they wouldn't have to Obliviate much time from the poor girl's mind.

No one wanted to do such a thing, but the stakes were kind of high at the moment. They wanted to trust her, but if she wasn't trustworthy then it was better to know that right away when it would be easiest to get out of the engagement.

"Luna?" Hermione tucked a lock of hair back behind her ear to ask.

The other girl blinked at her guilelessly, if somewhat out of focus. "Yes?"

Hermione looked over her shoulder, following Luna's gaze, and found a small cloud of creatures buzzing around there performing some incomprehensible dance. In the weeks since becoming a fairy, she'd noted that she could see all sorts of things that ordinary witches and wizards couldn't. But after the first few experiences of pointing them out, and learning her classmates couldn't see them, had become reluctant to bring them up in front of others for fear of their reactions. She'd seen how they'd treated Luna, after all.

It was something to talk about with the blonde, but not the present concern.

The bookworm rushed ahead. "Back when you were first teaching us fairy lore in that cave you mentioned that humans are blends of all kinds of things, but magical creatures had a clearly dominant few. I was just wondering, seeing as how all three of us are fairies now, what fairies tended to be, other than merely vain."

The blushing bookworm did not see fit to mention that she'd set a darkness charm on the mirrors in the rooms she used, limiting her to staring at her reflection for a mere half hour a day before they'd blank out. She'd needed it. It had led to her doing her hair and makeup by feel once or twice, but so far she had avoided any catastrophes of getting too caught up in staring at herself in her true form. Although, it felt like she was starving herself if she tried to go without looking at her fairy form entirely.

Privately she suspected that the other two had the same problem. Although little did she know that Luna indulged in far more than a mere half hour a day.

The girl descended from fairytale heroes and heroines turned to stare more directly at the daughter of dentists. "What brought this on?"

Hermione looked away, avoiding the true admission that she was becoming increasingly nervous about - her increasing need to be close to Harry, and the very weird sensation of having said those things around Narcissa. She'd always considered herself a very prudent, confident, conservative girl, and the things blurted out of her own mouth during that interview shocked her!

Still, there were plenty of concerns that didn't require her to make THAT sort of admission! "I'd noted we have ability to do wandless transfigurations, as well as the fire spells we'd expected to be able to do after that ritual. But I'd put that down to our powers, not our personalities. Only that brought the psychological potential for change to mind, and I'd wanted to know the risks."

There. Now she'd brought the subject up without admitting to the fact that Harry having other women mysteriously didn't bother her in the slightest.

Luna casually shrugged, avoiding a knowing smirk with considerable ease. "There are several different grades of fairy kind, and as the Queen so kindly pointed out, nothing but the most powerful could handle the amount of fairy magic our ritual inadvertently gave us. And, before you ask, the largest and most powerful fey are very humanlike in their temperaments. Although we do fall prey to obsessions easily, they're rarely more than fads. Since fairies live so long they rarely have many children, and so do not have what muggles would call generation gaps. But, as if to compensate, adult fey do go through phases of mania that compare well to fads. Why?"

Hermione sighed in relief. "Oh. That's a relief. I was worried that we might all begin to fall prey to mental disorders, or something."

Luna paused to consider, coming into focus mentally before she spoke. "I do see a little bit of influence of our current bodies shining through. You are the most curious, but I imagine that is because you knew the least about fairy lore or our new bodies and are, like all children, exploring what that means. In Harry I see a bit of the typical fairy vanity poking through in his desire to work out and increase the health and strength of his human body - because even in disguise, fairies cannot bear to not be beautiful. So he is fixing those problems so his original, mortal form will be better looking. Also, I see a bit of the tendency for obsessions in his present mania for defending us and our property from the coming war. But that's all perfectly understandable. It was and is a very real and pressing need, and I do appreciate him doing it. But the focus of his intent is such that he never lets up, and so accomplishes more in a few weeks than the most intense mortals would've in months. But, considering our vulnerable state and the experienced and entrenched nature of our opposition, it is an advantage."

Luna paused a moment, considering, before she voiced her thoughts aloud, "And the fact that time moves oddly around the fey may well be working in our favor. Have you not noticed how very much we get done in an average day? How long they feel? Do not forget WE are

fey! Nor that it was the Fairy Queen who set us on this journey. Tell me, do you even know what day it is? I've long since lost track myself."

Hermione was gosmacked. Aside from her birthday, which was... recent, she had no idea how much time had passed before school began. Each day seemed weeks long, and that was blurring things. Normally her course schedule was so important to her she never lost track of days of the week, but lately even on Normal Days she'd taken to just following the other students in her year around to find her way to what classes were being held. All thoughts of her normal schedule had fled her normally quite keen mind. However, thanks to the magically expanding bookbag Harry had gotten for her, she was able to carry about the texts and materials for them all without trouble.

She swallowed, chewed a lip thoughtfully then nodded. "I guess that makes sense, that she'd give us a little boost in overcoming the entrenched position of our main foe by granting us a little more time each day. She could even have given Harry a little nudge to help him acquire his drive to win this war. And as his friends we are just naturally helping him along."

Luna drilled her with a sudden, intense stare. "Hermione, make no mistake. We are Harry's friends and we are helping him, but we are also much more than that. Our bodies, and thus ourselves, were literally made to serve him by the author of our transformation. Harry is the hero. He was the person the Fairy Queen needed when she had a quest that needed accomplishing. She would have been happy with him alone, but we came along for the ride. No one is objecting to our presence, and Harry at least is very glad to have us along, but he is the key, and we were made to assist him in his pursuit of her goals. That is our purpose."

Luna blinked slowly, acquiring an odd expression as she tilted her head thoughtfully. "Still, it is not a bad thing to know the purpose of one's life."

But Hermione saw yet further. "And the ultimate goal is the propagation of our nearly extinct race, so we're fine with him being a playboy."

Luna nodded. "Frankly, judging by his embarrassed behavior when I was searching that woman for Marks, I'd say we're more fine with it than he is."

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Susan had begged off joining them immediately, so Harry was waiting for her outside of the Hufflepuff common room when instead of one girl, two emerged. One was the redhaired Hufflepuff he was expecting, the other a pink-faced blonde girl who, unlike Susan who wore her hair in a long plait down her back, was wearing her hair in pigtails and had dimples on her cheeks.

"Harry?" Susan presented her friend, who was blushing royally. "This is my best friend Hannah Abbott."

Harry gave the girl a short bow. "Charmed, I'm sure."

Hannah's already royal blush increased two steps as she returned him a short curtsy. "Hello. A pleasure to meet you. I always thought you seemed so nice."

"Harry," Susan was blushing now. "Hannah and I grew up together. We've always been the best of friends. And, you see, the thing is... well, every witch our age in the wizarding world grew up hearing stories about you, and most of us dreamed of one day marrying you."

Susan paused, blushing royally herself now and too embarrassed to continue until Hannah delivered a sharp yet discrete elbow to her ribs.

Harry was just confused.

Susan, now blushing like a beet, hurried on, "Anyway, Hannah and I played 'Marry Harry Potter' no more than most, but being best friends we did agree that if one of us got you we'd share you together."

Harry blinked.

He'd forgotten about Hufflepuff loyalty.

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"Harry, you're late!"

"Sorry," the boy answered. "Got sidetracked. I saw Snape and just HAD to compulse him to transfigure himself into a toad and leap into the mouth of some wild animal to be chewed up and devoured."

"Why all the complication?"

"Because I want it to be totally and legitimately accurate, after Dumbledore retrieves his Potion Master's remains and reanimates him, when I call Snape a walking piece of shit."

"And who are your companions?" Luna asked, blinking owlishly.

"Ah, please meet Hannah Abbott. Susan Bones you already know. Apparently at some point in their youth they agreed to share me."

"Hurray!" Luna shouted, jumping up and clapping her hands.

"Welcome to the club," Hermione told them both earnestly.

Harry sulked.

He had introduced the duo of Hufflepuffs to his other fiancées hoping for a veto on the extra girl, only to find both Luna and Hermione delighted by the concept and eagerly welcoming both of them.

He could never understand girls. Weren't they supposed to be jealous at times like this? Sometimes he wondered if he ever would understand them. Then he reached down into those memories of the seventy year old dark lord in his head and found Tom Riddle had come no closer to an answer than he. More dark lore than anyone else alive, yet girls were a mystery he'd never cracked. Harry might have given up right there save for the fact that Riddle had never tried. His only lusts had been for power, glory and immortality. So Harry felt there was still hope he might crack this mystery yet.

The poor boy.

The group eagerly began to educate the new arrivals. They'd stolen the Headmaster's penseive long ago, in one of the very first raids on his office, and though they'd never made time to watch all of those stored memories (something he resolved to do at the earliest opportunity, but they were so *busy* keeping his tail lit on fire by a continual string of emergencies, and preparations for later flight) the device was perfectly adequate, paired with the Room of Requirement, to simply show the new girls the experiences the Fey trio had been through up to that point in the year.

Harry, having developed a nearly unhealthy degree of paranoia, had been prepared for just about anything but what actually happened: The two girls plainly accepted everything.

Everything. They watched the conversation with Hermione where he and Luna had at last finally convinced her the Headmaster was playing foul, nodding along the whole while. The girls got excited by their triumphs surrounding the Goblet and empathized with the emergency they went through with the naiad lake and Fairy Queen, and the Hufflepuffs got downright determined to pitch in and do their fair share when they saw how hard the trio had been working to secure a base of operations at Godric's Hollow.

Harry had been gently watching their minds the entire time, and all of those feelings were genuine. The pair of Hufflepuffs agreed with their reasoning that the Headmaster was a Dark Lord, then later observation of the Escape From Hogwarts crystallized that in their minds as they saw the Headmaster lead an attack on his own former students, shooting down those who tried to escape on brooms and even injuring some quite severely.

Then those two cheered along with them as the Fey Trio relived their various memories of attacks on and traps laid for Dumbledore and his crony Snape.

Harry had been prepared for anything but how easily and completely the duo had been won over to his cause, believing completely in him

and the necessity of his campaign against Dumbledore. No Obliviation or mind-meddling required.

Frankly, he'd been so prepared for failure he wasn't sure how to cope with success.

Happily, his girls had no such problems. Honestly, Hermione had been shocked so completely so many times this past little while that she wasn't sure there was anything that could surprise her anymore. So they launched completely and immediately into befriending the new pair of girls.

Harry came back to ground somewhere in the middle of a conversation begun when one of the two Hufflepuffs had asked, "Are you really related to Alice in Wonderland?"

Luna was already smiling dreamily. "Oh yes."

"What's she like?" Susan pressed, having loved those stories long ago.

"Grandmother Alice generally gives herself very good advice (though she very seldom follows it). And sometimes she scolds herself so severely as to bring tears to her eyes; she told us once of trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she had been playing against herself, for she is very fond of pretending to be two people, when some magic of Wonderland hasn't shrunk her down so much there's hardly enough to make one respectable person."

"She sounds a bit... odd," Susan struggled not to be offensive.

Luna gladly shrugged. "Sometimes she's only as mad as a March Hare."

"Have you really got a March Hare in there?" Hannah queried.

"Of course!" Luna laughed. "There's also a Mad Hatter, and he tells the most excellent stories about fighting Batman in his youth, before he moved there. But once in Wonderland he couldn't get out, so well

suited to the place he could never leave. So he's been with us ever since. Although you mustn't believe him when he tells you stories about made-up people like Joker and Two-Face. The poor dear is mad, so he doesn't accept they can't be real."

Both Hufflepuff girls were wide-eyed. Hannah exclaimed, "It all sounds a bit like the tales of Disneyland some of our muggleborns were telling us."

Hermione tucked a lock of hair behind one ear and proudly played the voice of experience. "Disneyland is a pale shadow of an attempt to reflect what the Lovegood family reality is."

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Bellatrix was, contrary to her expectations, enjoying her stint replacing the Hogwarts librarian enormously. It was a great way to manipulate knowledge, just by hauling old books out of storage the Headmaster had ordered removed off the shelves and out of circulation, then putting them up in big displays at the front of the library, where the Ravensclaws would descend on them like starving wolves.

Most of the history books covering the magical world had gotten pulled out of circulation. But, since the history of the magical world was also the history of the pureblood families in it, as those were they who'd been around all that time, she felt it absolutely vital to get that knowledge out there so students could properly appreciate the importance of it!

It was also a great way to point students towards books that had recipes in them to neutralize love potions, as well as charms to detect whether or not someone was under those or similar effects.

There went the Headmaster's breeding scheme right there. No more sullyng the pureblood lines with mudblood infusions any more! Although that stud book of his had been absolutely fascinating reading, and explained why so many of the ancient, pureblood families had gotten married to mudbloods of late. Still, while she could appreciate a good scheme, it had to stop.

Bella would not tolerate her Lord's vessel getting pawed off on those blood traitor Weasleys!

Although if he wanted to keep the girl on as a sex slave she was fine with that. Still, there were so many better fish in the sea, and he had so much better taste. And to make sure he had all of the best options open, Bellatrix had privately commissioned the printing of several modern magical history books portraying Harry Potter as absolutely awesome no matter what the Daily Prophet said last year.

Those were going up in the front displays, too, in tasteful green covers that she had already begun to subtly bully the Slytherin girls his age into reading.

No, Bellatrix was having so much fun outwitting the Headmaster and undoing nearly a century of manipulating the curriculum by pointing students towards books they would have been reading had he not been messing with things that she could honestly say she'd never enjoyed anything not involving Crucios so much!

Why, it was even more fun than feeding a Dursley his own testicles! - something that she would've said was impossible only a week ago, when she would've sworn that she'd never enjoyed anything more.

She was just contemplating how best to highlight the appeal of a parselmouth as a spouse to those same impressionable Slytherin girls, who ought to know better than view it as a drawback in the first place, when she caught a hint of movement out of the corner of her eye.

She would've paid it no mind, only it was something invisible moving, and the eye drops she'd gotten long ago not only let her detect that, but made it so anything invisible things caught her attention more than anything else.

So what was Mad Eye Moody doing in a school?

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Mad Eye Moody was doing what he loved best - killing people.

He'd read up on the Headmaster's files on the boy, or what the Headmaster could recreate of those files, anyway. Seems he'd had a large number of break-ins, accidents and fires in his office of late. Still, there had been plenty of information about the boy's escapades, and it seemed he mostly survived by a stupid amount of luck.

Luck was easy to deal with, you just make sure all of the options are bad.

There was a certain art to it, but people who expected to jump aside at the last moment almost never expected the floor they landed on to be trapped. Those who lived by good luck and good reflexes, or the right amount of help showing up at just the right moment, just weren't prepared for when a floor fell out from under them on a route they'd always traveled safely before, dropping them thirty feet into a spiked pit full of trolls while the lid swings back into position over their heads, complete with locking and soundproof charms so their classmates could walk right over their life-or-death struggle never knowing or hearing of the slaughter going on under their feet.

Such a thing was easy to prepare. There were several such pits in Hogwarts. Most had been inactive for a terribly long time, just waiting for the right passwords to rearm them. And with the paintings all over the place, giving a password just as a certain boy walked by was childishly easy!

All he had to do was fill the pit with trolls.

No, people who lived by luck never expected the sort of things a lot of pre-planning could do to people.

Constant Vigilance was the only way to live life!

Dropped into such a situation, a person like Harry would probably be lucky enough to fall without injuring himself severely on any of the two-foot-tall metal spikes regularly spaced around the floor. And, given the boy's history against magical beasts in the past, he'd almost certainly figure out a way to miraculously defeat all four trolls.

But the silly boy would almost certainly expect the trolls to be the real danger, instead of just a momentary threat used to focus his attention. That would give the walls their time to flash-heat up to a temperature usually associated with smelting metal, frying all those caught inside. A Freezing Flame charm would be useless against the sort of threat, even if the boy knew it. And Potter's school marks did not support him being studious. Still, even if his female sidekick was there and fell in with him, they'd both die as there was no way they'd survive the heat, even if they did defeat the trolls.

And he knew a bunch of hags who'd pay dearly for a delicious roast witch or two, to say nothing of a slice of roast Boy-Who-Lived. No, he was planning to make a fortune peddling that boy's corpse among the various hag coveys. A little cut here, a little taste there, and he'd be as rich as the Malfoys.

Actually, since he stood a chance of killing the last of the Malfoys, now called Darling, along with the Harry Potter boy, maybe he could even convince the Headmaster to share the profits when he seized those accounts.

Now if only he knew of a market for roast trolls. Too tough a meat for hags, and besides he'd be wringing them of every drop of money for bites of Harry.

Moody peg-legged along, unaware he'd caught the notice of a librarian.

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Five young kids, Harry Potter and four girls, were heading along the corridors to lunch at the Great Hall when the floor fell out from under them.

Luna was fine, landing on her feet while the jeweled eyes of the cats on her girdle glowed, not even fussed over so short a drop. Harry was able to catch hold of his wits enough to Levicorpus the three other girls even during the middle of his own fall. But he himself hit rather badly, a long iron spike skidding off his silver armor to bruise despite

the enchanted dragonhide padding underneath. Luckily, Luna was able to catch the three other girls with her wand by that point, so they did not fall to impale themselves on the multitude of iron spikes below when he bounced and lost concentration.

That was when the trapdoor slammed shut above them, and four glowing pairs of eyes under sloped foreheads emerged out of the shadows around the pit before the slouched, muscular builds of trolls.

Susan and Hannah screamed, clutching each other in fright.

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Author's notes:

Sometimes as a writer one of the hardest things to do is recall that your characters know all that you or even your readers do. So plans have to fail for reasons entirely apart from them not being clever.

This sort of trap would kill most D&D characters, who consider themselves a paranoid and well-prepared lot (of course, there are exceptional specimens who'd come out just fine).

Of course, Harry is immune to heat, as are Hermione and Luna, but Susan and Hannah aren't. Plus, there are those trolls to consider.

Chapter Fifty-Five
by Lionheart

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There seemed an unwritten rule in the magical world: the larger a creature was, the more resistant it was to spells. This certainly held true for dragons and giants, but also to a lesser extent for trolls. Most people's spells would splash off their magically toughened hides.

Most people hadn't been terrorized by a troll in their first year, and so had considerable motivation to turn her research talents onto how to solve such situations, should one arise in the future.

Hermione's spell caught one troll in the eyes, blowing them apart and blinding the nasty creature.

Most people were also not so unconventional as to have nearly no relation to standard trains of thought. Luna's spell covered the ground under the trolls with ice. Then her second spell covered that with a layer of thick, slippery custard (not real enough for eating, unfortunately, but great for playing in).

Two trolls fell down. One impaled itself on one of the nearby spikes, gashing itself badly across the ribs, unfortunately it was not a fatal or a debilitating wound.

Both girls were also now resolving to follow Harry's example on this issue: armor was daily wear, not something put on for occasions. Because here was the first opportunity since acquiring any it would have been of good use, and they had it in their bags, but there was no time for them to safely pause and put it on.

As the trolls stopped to think (and trolls took a LONG time to think over anything more complicated than 'approach and bash') Harry unstopped three vials, and, mumbling something about 'would have preferred to wait to use one of my own batches for this' dropped scraps of ragged, hairless leather into each of them, passing one to each of Hermione and Luna, who had been casting spells to further daze and injure the trolls.

They all downed them, and as quickly as that three Nemean Lions stood between the Hufflepuff girls and the injured trolls. Now, at the size of a troll, those lions were no larger than a cougar was to a man, but a cougar was still perfectly able to kill a man. A lot of strength can be packed onto a feline frame, and its bits were far more pointy.

The lions lunged, going for the jugulars of three of the trolls, their claws digging in deeply despite the magical resilience of their flesh, grabbing hold so their hind paws could rake open those flabby bellies, spilling ropes of steamy intestines out onto the ground, even as their jaws tore out trollish throats.

Now a Nemean Lion was not as invulnerable as tales say, but they served quite adequately against these trolls. The one impaled on the spike, left for last as the least dangerous, lasted scarcely any longer than his fellows.

It was when they'd all transformed back to reassure Susan and Hannah, and cast cleaning charms to rid themselves of the troll blood all down the fronts of their mouths, clothes and hands, that Harry noticed the ice Luna had summoned was already missing, and the custard crisp around the edges.

He'd been a cook long enough to know what frying looked like when he saw it.

Whirling on the two Hufflepuffs, Harry shouted, "Quick! Climb into my pants!"

Susan and Hannah stared at each other disbelievingly, unable to believe he'd requested that so soon in the relationship, and under such circumstances too!

"No, into my pockets!" the boy hastily amended, seeing them misunderstand. "They're charmed to hold any amount of volume, and they're every bit as fire and heatproof as I am. They close with a perfect seal, you'll be safe in there. Now hurry!"

Noticing now, around their as yet unprocessed fright over the encounter, that he was correct in his observation that the chamber was heating up with alarming rapidity, the redhaired Susan and her pink faced blonde friend both scrambled eagerly into the pockets he was holding open for them.

Susan's boot soles were smoking by the time she made it in.

Before sealing them up, he told the girls in his pants pockets, "These are set up with spells to hold creatures I might find, and smuggle them past wards. You should have air in there for as long as you like. Your worst danger now is boredom. We'll let you out as soon as we can."

By the time he sealed those pockets air in the room was already sweltering.

"Charmed pockets?" was all Hermione said.

Harry blushed, rubbing the back of his head. "It was actually a trick known to a few aurors back during the last war against Riddle: carry about a few dangerous beasts in your pockets that you can set loose on your enemy if things get really bad. Both sides had figured it out and were using it before the end. It's like having a back-up wand, or dagger. Always have a few more surprises than your enemy is able to cope with. It's also one of the rare few ways to get a postmortem kill on your enemy: if you die and he starts to go through your pockets he might find his face ripped off before he knows what surprise thing he's set loose."

Luna was already levitating the dead trolls into her own pockets, and when inquiring looks were directed her way, simply answered, "Potion ingredients."

Casting several aquamenti spells, the group began washing the taste of troll out of their mouths while the water droplets boiled before reaching the floor.

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Mad Eye Moody had loosed a graphorn and a chimera from his pockets, and Bellatrix was chiding herself for not having picked up something suitable for these sorts of situations herself, since her stint at Azkaban had robbed her of her previous set.

Other than that, the fight was going pretty well. She knew Moody from back during the war, and they'd fought before, so she knew his style. While he, on the other hand, had been caught completely off-guard by her, thinking she was the school librarian.

For all his talk of paranoia, the human brain cannot function without certain assumptions. You have to believe that certain things are what they are, like your body, your wand, the Earth, etc. No one can bear the burden of being suspicious of all things all of the time. It can't be done. The mind would break if it tried to treat everything as a variable. It simply wouldn't function.

No, the biggest part of the reason Moody required such detailed information on a target before he would accept a hit was to reduce or eliminate all of the variables on the assignment. He could not be aware of everything at once. He could only do as her Lord had done and prepare for as many contingencies as possible. Sadly for him, those contingencies had not included being ambushed by a school librarian, who turned out to be one of the most elite Death Eaters in disguise.

Her first spell, a hex calling forth purple flame, would've cut him in half had it not been for the double layer dragonhide vest he wore under his enchanted and magically stiffened armored auror robes. But, knowing that he was a tough cookie to crumble, her first spell had been only the opening hex in a steady barrage of spells.

The corridor exploded around the ancient, gnarled hit wizard as he dodged, deflected and conjured barriers to her assault, all the while trying to put out the fire on his clothes and keep the rent through the back of his robes and armor continually facing away from her.

Bellatrix was having fun again!

This was why she served her master! The continual cornucopia of pleasures! One minute torturing a family of muggle beasts, the next undoing a century of manipulation by the arrogant old Headmaster by revealing some portion of what he'd hidden from the curriculum, then unleashing devastation at school in front of terrified students while she fought an elite auror to a standstill!

Life simply didn't get any better than this!

Bellatrix switched to her animagus form, a deadly yet beautiful pure white tiger, not exactly suitable for a pet (unless she took shrinking draughts that she was already preparing, in which case she could look like an adorable white cat with tiger stripes that could be colored white if need arose) to dodge out of the way of a barrage of destructive spellfire, blasting apart the corridor above her head.

Cats can leap twenty to thirty feet with ease when greatly motivated. The paranoid auror blew apart the staircase where she'd been standing, leaving absolutely no room to duck or hide as the entire hall, high or low, side to side and top to bottom, was filled with explosions, poison gas, reaching tentacles transfigured from scattered detritus, and a wide area stunning charm.

But the tigress was already behind him.

Even as Moody was realizing he didn't see her shielding under this onslaught as he'd expected, her reaching claws skittered off his armored robes. But the force of the impact still bruised and stunned him, he just didn't leave his entrails spread all over the floor.

She would have finished him then, biting his unprotected throat out with her jaws, had not she been knocked off the top of the stunned auror by the force of the chimera he'd unleashed ramming into her side in a pounce not unlike the one she'd used on her own prey a moment before.

Against the creature's expectations she transformed back within its claws rather than try the lesser strength of a tiger against the much more fearsome magical beast. In this, it thought to shred her apart at once, as the strength of a witch in a wrestling claw vs claw match was

negligible, where a tiger at least stood a chance. However, in this desire the chimera was disappointed, as its teeth and claws simply skidded off her silver armor.

She had taken to following her lord's example in wearing that at all hours.

The chimera realized, to its shame, that it couldn't penetrate her protection with its teeth or claws just as she'd blasted it across the hallway, sending the monster skidding across the floor to smash into the doors of the Great Hall and burst them open. The enraged beast surged to its feet in the midst of that chamber, roaring defiance out of all three heads before it lunged back out to rejoin the fighting, greatly startling those already at lunch.

Several among the students who'd moments before been peacefully taking in a relaxing repast found their underwear needed to be changed. Hair stood on end in every department, and more than a few staff were stuttering in horror, their minds unable to make the switch from a perfectly ordinary everyday feast to such a shocking display of raw and open violence.

Madam Pince, for that was the form Bellatrix was still wearing, got blasted in those doors moments later, her upper torso held in the jaws of a graphorn while she repeatedly stabbed the beast with a silver dagger in one hand and blocked, dueled and counterfired spells with the wand in her other.

Idly, in those corners of their minds not gibbering with horror, several of the children resolved to be more respectful of those books they'd checked out.

Without even bothering to attend to the monster trying to chew upon her, Bellatrix transfigured the benches some of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were seated on into giant anacondas which immediately dumped them on their behinds and slithered out those massive doors to engage in the horrible fighting beyond. One immediately got blasted into bloody bits, only for her to transfigure it afresh into a swarm of harpies that shrieked aloud and began to swoop in on attacks versus her unseen assailant.

Finally ramming her dagger in deep in the neck of the graphorn that had her in its mouth, she got far enough in past those massively overstrong layers of nearly impenetrable hide and severed the spinal cord, paralyzing the beast with a mortal stroke and regaining her freedom, just as Moody decided on a tactical retreat (not having been paid or assigned to kill the librarian) and began to leave the vicinity of the Great Hall. So she followed him out, leaving those in the Hall no clue as to who she had been fighting, and no explanation or evidence beyond the missing benches, the destruction, and a slowly dying graphorn lying wheezing for every breath on the stones of the Great Hall, a dagger of goblin silver still lodged in its spine, stuck there by the force of the blow that impaled it there, and abandoned by the embattled witch.

That, and the steadily fading sounds of ever-more distant explosions.

Neville turned to the girl sitting opposite him, a buttered roll forgotten in his hands, and said, shaking his head, "Harry's got to be involved in this."

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"Okay, now you've got admit, the fireproofing ritual was handy. Anyone hurt?"

"I think Hermione's underwear caught fire, but she's okay." Luna giggled.

"What can I say? I prefer cotton to silk. They're more absorbent." Hermione was rather annoyed at her underwear having burst into spontaneous flame on her, but was otherwise unharmed.

"Personally, I never wear the stuff," Luna offered.

Able to ignore the heat, it hadn't taken the trio long to figure out a way to circumvent the charms holding the trapdoor closed and rise out of their trap levitating each other, although Luna had preferred to climb.

Glancing aside at the devastation that sealed the hallway they'd been going down on their way to the Great Hall, and hearing the receding sounds of battle beyond, Harry quickly opened a third pocket even while rescuing two terrified Hufflepuffs from his first two.

"Harry, what's that?" Susan Bones froze at the sight of the large snake he'd taken out of his pants.

"A basilisk. It hatched only two days ago. A pity, actually. Those claw marks in the stone are of a chimera. I heard one in the halls above us earlier, only no wizard has ever defeated one and lived. I'd a small hope this guy's gaze could do it, but it's still only a tiny thing, and just like those mandrakes last year, immature its killing gaze can't even make you dizzy."

Luna calmly put a hand on his arm, and kindly said, "Believe."

Seconds later the tiny snake was growing, enlarging to enormous size before the girls' eyes as it seemed to age dozens of years every second until it was every bit as large as the snake he'd played with in the Chamber of Secrets.

"Mount up!" Harry cried, conjuring saddles. Not even Hermione questioned the ability of fairy magic to make the creature grow a thousand years in less than a minute, simply accepting help into a seat behind Harry behind the thing's massive head.

Albus Dumbledore came around the corner, having hurried to the scene to investigate this unplanned commotion. Apparently the old geezer had some serious charms on his glasses, as looking at it through them he turned to stone rather than keeling over dead.

Not one to overlook a happy circumstance, or the Headmaster's bad luck, Harry transfigured the man into a small plushy and pocketed him to dispose of later.

"Right, eyes shut," he ordered the impossibly massive serpent as he took up the reins. "We're going to have to shortcut through the Great Hall if we're to catch up to that battle."

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McGonagall, like virtually all of the rest of the staff and students, stared in unmitigated shock and horror at the dying form of the terrible magical beast that had only recently been trying, unsuccessfully to everyone's surprise, to eat the Hogwarts librarian.

Only Hagrid had risen past this sensation, and was dragging madam Pomphrey over to help heal the 'wee little thing.'

The Deputy Headmistress was only shaken out of her shock by a loud bang as the side doors in from the antechamber slammed open under great force. Her shocked eyes joined others in snapping that way just in time to see Harry Potter surge inward, his girls all trailing along behind him. It was only after that fact registered that it became clear to her stunned senses that the group of children were all seated as they moved, and it was only once that fact got processed that her attention turned to what they were riding, just in time as a sixty five foot serpent slithered into the room, rearing up approximately twenty feet once it had cleared the door.

"Hi ho Blinky, Away!!" Harry shouted, waving the Sorting Hat above his head in one hand as he held the reins in the other, spurring the beast on.

"They went thataway!" Hermione shouted, getting into the spirit of things as she pointed to the ruined main doors. "Let's head 'em off at the pass!"

"Don't worry girls," Luna reassured the audience. "Blinky here is perfectly harmless so long as she keeps her eyes shut."

"Blinky?" The word somehow burst from McGonagall's lips.

"The basilisk from the Chamber of Secrets!" Luna chirruped back happily. "Harry fetched her when he learned there was a chimera in the castle, as no wizard has ever defeated one of those and lived. So we thought we'd give a thousand year old basilisk a try!"

Luna's words came floating back in as the massive king of serpents vanished through the ruined main doors, not having paused once in its pursuit of the increasingly distant fight.

McGonagall fainted.

Hagrid could not control the look of adoration in his eyes as he watched the tail end of the snake depart through the doors.

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Amelia Bones smiled up as the auror stepped into her office for a private interview concerning his latest report. She continued smiling as the man sat down in the chair facing her, and that smile became genuine when the charm placed on the seat knocked him out the moment he'd settled in.

Her normally sharp-witted aurors had pooh for brains, having been under compulsions from Dumbledore for so long. He hadn't suspected a thing.

With the auror helpless before her, Amelia slipped out a hand-copied sheet Harry had been nice enough to provide from that book on how to reverse Obliviation, checking it briefly before waving her wand over the helpless auror to restore the person's memory of the true account of the Prophet Incident, the events of that morning that Dumbledore had erased from their minds.

That done, it was a much simpler matter to erase the compulsions he'd also laid on them.

With that out of the way, Amelia then woke her auror to begin explaining everything that had gone on since that frightful day, what she intended to do about it, and the auror's part in her plans.

It might take some time, reclaiming her auror force one by one like this, but eventually she'd get them all. The ones under compulsion were sloppy, and the Headmaster had kept control so long, while so rarely issuing new orders (or refreshing old ones) that they were starting to become listless, like toys whose springs had run down.

No, she would get her aurors back, and then there would be a reckoning with Albus Bloody Dumbledore.

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The group of Hogwarts students riding a basilisk emerged from the castle to find that the battle had left them behind, and there was no sign of the combatants.

"I see nobody on the road," said Hermione, holding her hand up to shield her eyes and scanning the distance.

"I only wish I had such eyes," Luna remarked in a fretful tone. "To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance, too! Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!"

Hermione wrinkled her nose in distaste at being made fun of. However, in looking back behind her to see the blonde she also saw and considered the castle. "Luna, I've been meaning to ask, if wizards are so well protected from muggles, why do we even need to hide?"

The blonde girl shrugged. "You can protect yourself with every spell on Earth, and it does not help if a mob with pitchforks decides to stab you to death. If you have no safe place to go, and muggles are everywhere, then eventually they will find and destroy even the most fantastically powerful wizard - and the bulk of our magical population could scarcely be termed 'powerful' at all. So we built fortresses. Then it was easier to hide them than to deal with the muggles catapulting in burning pitch and tar, dead bodies, and every other noxious thing they could find. Magic may be strong, but muggles are inventive and it was just easier to hide from them than fight a war we could not win. A wizard who can stand against one muggle could be overcome by ten; one who could kill ten still die to hundreds, and so on. We are fantastically outnumbered and always have been."

"But there are so many forms of magical transportation!"

"Yes," Luna remarked calmly. "But most of those were developed after we went into hiding. Before the Statute of Secrecy, the only commonly used form of magical transport was a flying broom, and those can be dealt with easily by archers. Brooms were neither fast, maneuverable, nor high flying back then. All of those developments are comparatively recent."

Now Hermione scowled, pursuing a different thought. "That reminds me, we are going to need some kind of defense against aerial attacks on Godric's Hollow. Our enemies are sure to use some." She sighed. "Oh well, I suppose we could still handcraft a rifle."

"Sure. Why would you want to?" Harry quipped, still scanning the horizon for traces of the two combatants. "Even handcrafted, it could not sustain the really fine tolerances. So it would be more work and less accurate than the archery we are already learning."

Hermione smirked. "You said it yourself, Harry. Guns replaced bows because they are easy to use. I was thinking of something we could put in the hands of the common townsfolk to make flying overhead unwise."

"Sadly, they'd never use it," Luna corrected, shaking her head. "They have a phobia of acting too muggle, or using certain tools, and guns have a very bad rep among wizards. Only the lowest would use them, as it's seen as admitting you are no good with a wand, so they're often called 'squib-sticks'. Besides, you know how easy it is to repel them. I much prefer our magic bows."

"You guys are learning archery?" Hannah inquired, blinking curiously.

"Yes, and of course you're invited, to our workouts as well, naturally," Luna reassured. "We'll show you the spells this evening."

"Got it!" Harry cried, and the basilisk surged off after their quarry. "Moody had pulled out a magic broom and raced across the ward line to apparate out. But his chimera is still fighting Bellatrix. It's chasing her into the Forbidden Forest. C'mon!"

Author's Notes:

Wow! Most of my work on this chapter didn't actually end up in this chapter, but had to be put off for another one. Oh well, hope you enjoyed it anyway.

Chapter Fifty-Six
by Lionheart

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The commotion in the Great Hall was intense. After several minutes of folks freezing in combinations of shock and horror, suddenly it all seemed to be released at once and voices filled the chamber as many people were talking at once; some even getting up to go to their rooms to pack, as they'd had no idea before this those wild tales they'd heard over the years were really true and the castle really was that dangerous. Others didn't know what to do, but it was as crowded and noisy as a train station as they figured it out.

Among all of this, Neville was a tiny island of peace, continuing casually on with his lunch as though nothing had happened.

"How did you know it was involving Harry?" Lavender asked, leaning over. He'd known what it was all about even before his appearance in the hall!

Neville shrugged. "Anything that dangerous at this school always does."

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Normally finding a chimera in a forest was harder than you'd think. Sure, they were huge masses of razor sharp claws and teeth, but most of those know how to hide pretty well when they put their minds to it. It's all part of that 'Apex Predator' options package, and magical predators tended to be more apex than most.

Plus, they wouldn't want to spoil the surprise when they came lunging out of the bushes at you. You thought Quidditch fans were freaks, always thinking of the game? Well, they had nothing on stalking animals. Crouching down behind what seemed totally inadequate cover then leaping out to maul you to death was their life. They lived for this.

And Moody had gotten through what mysterious means no one knew, one of the more vicious chimeras from the Continent, one in its prime.

The more spectacularly dangerous beasts in the magical world tended to be very long-lived. There was a good reason for this: seeing as how they were so very hard to kill they either died of natural causes or not at all. But however they died they had to be replaced. If they died by natural means that meant they had to breed fairly often, and that meant young things exploring their powers went off causing chaos, drastically increasing their impact on the world around them. Also, young things fed prodigiously while growing.

But not all magical beasts grew more powerful with age. Sphinxes surely, and dragons most definitely, with basilisks holding the crown of 'we never get older without getting tougher'. But some preferred to burn hot and fast and go out in a blaze of glory at ages no older than a man.

Part of the natural order of the magical universe. No matter how old or tough a dragon or sphinx might grow there was always some new chimera just aching to take it on. Containing the rambunctious creatures had nearly broken the backs of the Greek Wizarding community until they'd used up an entire dragon preserve reducing the chimera population for a brief moment, then used some massive magical artifacts to transfer the entire preserve to deepest Africa, where Nundus could catch any that escaped the preserve.

This ready supply of food had begun to increase the nundu population, which was bad, as the last time those had overpopulated their breeding grounds and gone searching for more places to nest it had led to something the muggles called the Black Plague - and they still didn't know the true cause behind that. Luckily the winters had managed to kill off all of the migratory breeding pairs, or Europe would be a desolate wasteland even today.

Still, it was only muggles, after all.

So how Moody had gotten hold of a young chimera was a bit of a mystery, but still quite an impressive feat.

"Harry, we're going to need it alive - more potion ingredients," Hermione instructed boldly. "Petrified is alright, we can restore it later with a mandrake restorative draught. But dead we can only harvest it once. We can't feed it potions and things to make its skin regrow if it's dead."

"Right." The boy conjured a veil and draped it over the snake's face as they entered the Forbidden Forest.

Normally catching a dangerous predator on its own turf was hard without it catching you first. However in this case they had an advantage, and simply followed the sounds of battle.

Things had gone poorly for Bellatrix. The chimera is a dangerous magical beast for many reasons, and it had quite a few deadly weapons in its arsenal. Having learned that it could not penetrate her outer armor with its tearing and cutting bits, it had moved on to other methods, smashing into her with its ram horns (blunt trauma was limited by her protective plates, but not all absorbed by her minimal padding), grabbing her helmet in the jaws of its dragon head and swinging her wildly around, smashing her into trees and so on. It also breathed flame upon her.

Voldemort's most loyal Death Eater had been protected from the direct impact of all of that. Still, it was equivalent to having been in several car crashes one after another. Her head hadn't been torn off due to the buckles holding it in place on the rest of the armor, and her bones hadn't been powdered because her silvery plate wouldn't let them flex in certain unnatural directions, but neither was she well. Her flesh had been bruised and battered to the point where that alone might kill her.

She also had borderline lethal burns all over her body.

There was a reason no witch or wizard had ever defeated a chimera and lived, and it wasn't because of their sunny disposition or that no one had ever thought to wear armor up against one before.

Sadly, there was very little chance for the lovely Death Eater to survive her encounter, even after Blinky burst through the bushes with her riders and the chimera froze into a statue of stone.

"Chimera Vs Blinky, FIGHT! Aww, they got it over with before I could cheer," Luna drooped in her saddle.

Harry had already popped out of the saddle and gone over to visit Bellatrix, lifting her head so it was not uncomfortable for the dying witch, as she still hung out of the chimera's central mouth and the statue was now not able to release her.

"This was a good day." The witch reached up her one unbroken hand to touch her lord's cheek. The other had bent unnaturally backwards at the elbow, and likely would have been torn off had the chainmail been able to part to let it, but she seemed beyond the pain as she traced his cheek and smiled.

Harry choked up, not knowing what to say. On the one hand she was his foe, even though she didn't know it, deceived into his service, while on the other he had never had anyone serve him so faithfully and well.

Dying eagerly in his cause had bought her considerable credit, as well. But still, she was his enemy.

The poor boy didn't know what to think. Neither of his lives gave him any experience with how to deal with such a situation. Riddle discarded his tools once they were no longer of any use to him, while Harry had never been put in that position before.

He didn't like it.

Bellatrix coughed, blood marking the corner of her lips as internal damage made itself known, but continued smiling as she petted his cheek, reading his emotions despite his being unable to speak them. "My lord, I have been, and always shall be, your most devoted follower."

The blue glow of a magical oath surrounded her.

"Yipee!" A smiling Luna yanked Harry's feet out from under him, causing him to fall flat on his face into the churned up turf, and clearing the path for Bellatrix, who had been staring up at him, to see the veiled basilisk that had been behind him all along, obscured from view by his body.

The witch froze into immobility, turned to stone.

"What did you do that for!?" Harry stormed to his feet, twisting about to glare at the witch who had tripped him.

Luna was unperturbed, fighting giggles as she pointed out the petrified witch to him. "Harry, she was moments away from death, and now she isn't. She could wait in that condition, unchanging for ages. We have all the time in the world to heal her."

Harry brushed grass off his arms. "With as far gone as she was, I doubt that all I could do would be enough to save her."

"Why don't we take her to St. Mungo's?" Susan chirped from the back of the basilisk she was still mounted on.

"Yeah, they do nearly anything to save the librarian of Hogwarts after she proved herself such a champion," Hannah nodded, agreeing with her friend.

"Impossible," Hermione shook her head, sadly, pointing to the petrified near-corpse. "Because that is not Madam Pince, it's really Harry's bodyguard. And the polyjuice would surely wear off during the procedures to save her."

"But they'd be even more willing to save Harry's bodyguard!" Susan insisted.

"Normally yes, in this case no." Harry stood up, straightening from where he'd bent over to examine Bellatrix's features.

"But why?" Susan wondered in confusion.

Harry sighed, hating to explain some things. "You know from watching our recent history how Dumbledore is our enemy. Well, one problem there is that we don't know any magical adults that he didn't know better. In fact he has been very carefully keeping me isolated, and I don't know anyone he doesn't have a great deal of influence over."

"There's always my aunt," Susan protested.

Harry gave her a weak smile. "While that's true now, it wasn't the case when we were starting this. I barely met her a few days ago, and right now she is suffering from the same problem I am - she doesn't know who she can trust. Dumbledore has influence everywhere."

"Okay," the two Hufflepuffs nodded, seeing his point so far.

Harry rubbed a hand nervously through his hair. "So I went to the one place I could be fairly sure Dumbledore wasn't well respected when I got my guard - the Death Eaters. I tricked one of them into thinking I was going to be the vessel of Voldemort reborn and needed her to watch over me to keep me safe. She fell for it and has been watching my back ever since."

Susan felt cold, and she and Hannah shared a concerned glance. That was more balsy than she'd given the Gryffindor credit for, and that was AFTER hearing tales of his fame and glory!

"I can't tell if that was brilliant and brave or cunning but stupid," Hannah quipped. "It could have gone wrong so many different ways."

Now it was time for Hermione to quirk her lips. "It something was stupid but worked, it wasn't stupid."

Harry nodded tiredly. "At least this way I knew what direction my threats came from, and that gave me some control over the risks."

"So who was it?" Susan wet her lips nervously, not sure she'd like the reply.

She was right.

"Bellatrix LeStrange," Luna bubbled. "And she's been ever so useful! Did you know she replaced Mr Filch before Madam Pince? The entire school is ringed about with spies, inside and out. Why, the paintings spy for Dumbledore, as do the ghosts and all of the prefects and teachers. Also she only just helped to foil an assassination plot on all of us today - And then she just now swore on her magic to follow Harry loyally!! SQUEEE!!"

Everyone stared in shock at the happy Ravenclaw, who paused a moment to explain, "Don't you understand? No names were used in that oath! She just met his eyes and swore, calling him her lord, and *anyone* can be a lord if you want to swear loyalty to them! Sworn loyalty **MAKES** someone a lord! More than anything else does, anyway."

Harry smacked his lips, gazing thoughtfully at Bellatrix' statue. "Trouble now is she has conflicting oaths. Loyalty oaths are inherent in the fabric of the Dark Mark. Actually it's more of a slavery brand and not even I can release her from those restrictions and remove that without killing her."

"Just wait a few days." Luna smiled mysteriously.

Hermione suddenly sat up in her seat, jolted as though stuck with a pin. "Hey! It's not yet noon, and we don't have any time to spare! Quickly, let's all get to the Clearing of Solstices and Equinoxes. Susan and Hannah both need that ritual and we only have a few minutes to get them there!"

"Right!" Harry shrank the two linked statues and put them in his pocket, then swung back up onto Blinky, taking up the reins.

Trelawney had been left in charge at the clearing, running the ritual every day trying to get the maximal number of nymphs and fairy creatures covered by that protection. But they didn't have many days left before the equinox and they lost this opportunity for another year.

Jolting through them was the realization that this was, in fact, the LAST day, as the Fall Equinox came tomorrow!

Luckily they got there in plenty of time.

Harry excused himself to go off alone into the forest, and the two girls who had been through this before helped the newcomers strip and slipped them into the broth along with a collection of forest nymphs and pixies, making for one tight squeeze as everyone fought to fit in and not spill any broth. Finally Hermione raised the outside lip by conjuring a tight-fitting splash guard to slip in between the cauldron and its lid - not a moment too soon as the sun blazed down moments later, as they were still shifting to get comfortable and not poke too many knees or elbows into each other.

Hermione then sighed in relief, smiling. "Well, at least that's taken care of."

"I do admit, I am much relieved to think our protections now extend to them." Luna agreed. "It makes crises like this morning less awkward."

"We've been lucky so far." Hermione brushed hair damp with sweat out of her eyes.

Luna cocked her head slightly, staring off into the distance. "Luck is an important asset, but skill and good judgment are far more reliable." She presented Hermione with a warm smile. "Lucky for us, Harry has one and you have the other."

The bushy haired witch gave her friend a comforting hug. "We all contribute."

Harry came back into the clearing. "Hey, you two. I think now is a good time to try stealing as much of this forest as we can get away with. Dumbledore is momentarily out of the picture, and Blinky here is a great force for getting the acromantulas and other dangerous critters out of our way."

Luna glanced over to the bubbling cauldron. "Wait until the ritual is done. We don't want to introduce any new variables."

All three shuddered at that comment, recalling what had unintentionally been done before, and the risks it had all put them through.

So, an hour later, after transfiguring sticks all that time into man sized wooden soldiers (both girls could do that much, although it took Harry to animate them), Harry slipped off into the forest again while Hannah, Susan, and the nymphs got out and dried themselves off.

Then it was time to start the march.

"I have to admit," Susan agreed as they saddled up on Blinky, "The idea of Harry relocating large portions of the Forbidden Forest makes a lot of sense. It's a large part of Hogwarts' power to have easy access to both light and dark creatures, plants and other magical ingredients right on their door step. Taking that away would be a tremendous blow to the Headmaster."

"And we can always restore it later," Hannah agreed.

"As many creatures as wish to return will be welcome to," Hermione primly asserted, knowing full well from having been through that sanctuary a few times, and talking to Firenze, that everything that forest was meant to preserve couldn't wait to get out of there and had no intention of returning.

Ever.

They'd seen what life could be like under wizard's control, and were anxious to try a bit of proto-self-government under Harry's protection. The Fae Trio simply didn't have time to look after the forest themselves, so they'd be appointing trustworthy creatures as officers beneath them to wield what little authority was required for the creatures to get along peacefully, and it was an experiment many were eager to try.

Of course, the only authority they had was as champions of the Fairy Queen, so of necessity the best they could do was to act on that

pattern. So it was going to be something of a magic kingdom, but that was all they could do.

But it was time to begin the march.

A trumpet sounded and the wall of transfigured wooden soldiers took their first steps forward, armed with pikes and compressed air rifles (having done those a few trumpet players had not been beyond Harry's ability) as well as wooden cavalry armed with swords and lances.

They'd actually retreated a short distance to begin this march from the Hogwarts edge of the forest, so as not to miss anything. Having had several hours to transfigure them (along with Harry's previous stash, transfigured as guardsmen) they'd had more than enough time (and, with the natural gift fae had at transfiguring, also the ability) to create a small army of hundreds of six foot tall wooden soldiers.

They marched out in front, begging 'shoot me please' to the dark creatures of the forest. There were so many of the soldiers that it was a choice to every creature they met: either retreat before their lines or attack them. They marched too close to each other for there to be other options.

Light creatures they encountered would be recognized and passed harmlessly through their lines. Dark creatures would encounter combat.

As implacable as an avalanche, as thorough as a forest fire, they marched through those woods slaughtering every dark beast they came across, the five magical youths transfiguring additional guards to protect any special locations they came across.

One of the first locations secured was the Clearing of Solstices and Equinoxes. Having found that to be tremendously useful they especially wanted to be able to move it successfully with Harry's staff.

Luna was having a wonderful time, wearing her own generals hat and issuing orders as she waved about a wooden sword. Even Hannah and Susan began to get into this a bit. Hermione and Harry were

more wary. All of the people had wooden horses to ride. This freed up Blinky to act at her swiftest, moving with snakelike speed to respond to any attacks on their line without whiplashing her riders to death with her turns. But Harry and Hermione were both concerned with encountering more attacks than she could deal with.

Overhead flew clouds of fairies, most of them spitting sparks or goutts of fire out of nearly a month worth of empowerment rituals. Anything too small for the wooden soldiers to spot was obvious to the tiny fairies, and with the soldiers out in front to stop any big creatures or blunder first into any webs, the fire-enhanced fairies were a potent threat to anything near their size.

And as they marched they encountered allies.

The centaurs of the forest first came curiously to see the cause of the horns. When they saw the march of the wooden soldiers backed up by clouds of fairies, four witches and a wizard, along with the mightiest basilisk they had ever seen, they quickly galloped off to inform their tribes. When further scouts observed them passing unicorns and other light creatures by, but falling upon the dark ones and slaughtering them, units of centaur archers formed up behind their lines, following along to add arrows to the threats the dark creatures of the forest had to face.

One of their first big surprises was running into a massive village halfway through the forest. It had to be twice as big as Hogsmead, and full of magical people, but had been kept utterly secret from the outside world.

They learned why when the villagers transformed to meet them.

Their wooden army had drawn up in ranks at the edge of the clearing, waiting for orders. The townsfolk had seen them, then transformed into wolf shape to charge right at the attacking line, without the wizarding children or their creations having shown them the least bit of hostility.

"Werewolves!" The fae children declared in shock.

Harry got angry. "I should have known! Draco knew these were here in our first year, and both Filch and Hagrid confirmed it! But I don't think anyone had any idea there were this MANY of them! There's got to be a few thousand here!" He paused, scowling. "Well, that explains where Greyback's been hiding. The Ministry's been after him for years but never could find him."

Hermione turned to look at her best friend. "You mean not even Voldemort knew of this place?"

Harry shook his head, paling at the implications. "No, he didn't. Somebody hid this place very well, and since I don't see any fields or farms here, that means they get their supplies in from outside."

Luna began nodding, seeing where he was going with this. "Supplies for an entire town on a continuing basis are a difficult thing to hide."

The boy nodded. "Yeah. Anybody can build a secret base or muster an army, but when problems come lunchtime. Feeding a large group of people secretly is virtually impossible. Only here someone did it."

"Dumbledore," Hermione declared, scowling, then sighed. "Well, now at least we know one of the reasons why he called off the hunts through this forest."

"And why he was so interested in controlling the magical food supply," Luna continued, observing, "If he was the only one to grow and distribute it, then he could afford to siphon off as much as he liked to secret locations like this one without anyone being the wiser."

"But that could be a good thing, right?" Susan asked from behind them. "He set up a sanctuary for these people to live in where they wouldn't harm anyone else, where they could be alone and not bother anyone."

"I've always thought our society treated werewolves unfairly," Hannah told them. "It's only a disease."

"A disease more contagious than any other, since its victims go feral and actively spread the affliction three days each month. A disease for which there is no cure, and lasts your whole life long." Hermione disapproved. "I don't mind isolating them, since I think that's the right idea. You can let them live more or less normal lives without threatening anyone else. But something tells me that Dumbledore's plans for this place were not so innocent."

The front ranks of the attacking werewolves met the pikes of their wooden infantry, and the eyes of the children widened in shock as they realized the wooden tipped spears which had served adequately through most of the rest of the forest were utterly inadequate going up against weres. The wounds they dealt healed as fast as they dealt them, leaving uninjured wolves to tear through their infantry lines after a short crush.

"Silver!" Hermione began quickly search through her pockets. "Who has any silver? Look through your pockets for loose change we can transfigure!"

Harry signaled and Blinky raised her head, sweeping the charging lines of wolves with her still-veiled gaze, petrifying hundreds of werewolves and stopping the attack, as suddenly the rest began fleeing for their lives.

"Did you know these were here?" Harry asked of the centaur that had trotted up beside him.

Bane soberly shook his mane. "We knew something was here that werewolves protected. And we knew there were far too many of them for any of the Headmaster's feeble excuses to explain. But we knew not the extent, nor the true nature of what they were hiding."

The centaur glanced at him sidelong. "We only knew they brought in human children every month at the full moon. Children who never left again."

Harry's face had gone stony.

It was Hermione's quite voice that proclaimed, "This isn't a village. This is a werewolf factory. Dumbledore's been building up an army of them."

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Author's Notes:

You know that bit in the first novel/movie where they are going on detention into the Forbidden Forest and Draco declares that he's not going in there because the place is full of werewolves? Then Filch agrees? Why has no one ever explained what they were doing there? Or ever mentioned them again?

You'd think a large number of critters that were people for twenty five days out of twenty eight would have built something wherever they lived.

Also, where have Remus and Greyback been living all this time? And why has the Ministry never caught Greyback or Remus never saw Harry? My explanation is a sinister one because that fits my story, but a hidden village of werewolves in there could be adapted to all sorts of plotlines.

Chapter Fifty-Seven
by Lionheart

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As distasteful as they found it, they couldn't leave a hostile army at their backs, so Harry ordered the assault, sending forth his wooden troops to scare out the hidden weres so that Blinky could petrify them.

"You're not killing them?" Susan asked, then sighed. "That's a relief."

Hannah's face was ashen at the nightmare of all of those werewolves getting out and going on rampages. "We don't want to set them loose, either!"

"They could infect the entire countryside, and have no reason to love us," Luna agreed. "All in all the Ministry's handling of the werewolf issue never did make much sense. It's a super contagious, uncontrollable disease that takes nothing more than a scratch or bite to spread. There is no cure and once a person is infected they are a danger to everyone around them. About the only thing stopping this plague from spreading to insane levels is probably the natural tendency for werewolves kill and eat their prey. It takes intervention by outside forces or luck for someone to not die from an attack."

Hermione's face had gone stony. "But instead of providing them sanctuaries, places to be contained for their own safety and that of others during their transformations, the Ministry offends them, deprives them of jobs so they can't afford to take steps to isolate themselves securely, and treats them like dirt without actually offering any solution to the problem they spread. It's like everything they do is designed to make the situation worse!"

"That might be the point," Harry offered, sitting on the back of his wooden horse. "Recall that the Ministry has been Dumbledore's sock puppet for longer than any of us have been alive. He's had so much power for so long that if things are the way they are that is because that's the way he wants them to be. Yet nothing's been done to stop this contagion. Think about it."

He turned look at his ladies. "Werewolves actually get off a bit lucky, while the Ministry treats them like second or third class citizens they don't seem to actively try to kill them off, or more rationally to isolate or secure them. Add to that how easy it is to spread... Dumbledore could have an unlimited army of down trodden and desperate people in the werewolves in no time. All it would take is chaining down one or two wolves during a full moon and controlling who they bit or scratched enough to ensure they lived. Suddenly you've got any number of people who have no rights, and believe only their champion, Dumbledore, cares enough to campaign to get them any."

The boy inhaled a large breath, then huffed it out. "Unfortunately, take a look passed the surface and you'll see that he's got so much authority that he could give them any rights he wanted, more or less by fiat. The fact that he doesn't proves that he's just dangling a carrot before them to get more loyal followers who are fanatically devoted to his cause."

Susan felt shocked. "So nothing is being done to protect people?"

Harry speared her with a gaze. "Why would a Dark Lord want to limit the size of his army? The more people this spreads to, the more fanatically devoted followers Dumbledore has who are willing to do anything for his promises."

"And before you object," Hermione interjected. "I think calling Dumbledore a Dark Lord is more than appropriate considering his evil, morally reprehensible and disgusting program of abuse against Harry."

"To say nothing of all his other programs of abuse and horror," Luna gave a soft shudder.

"And worst of all," Hermione growled darkly. "We've seen these werewolves transforming to fight us, and it **isn't** nighttime and it's **not** a full moon! That means someone has been working on upgrading their powers, allowing them more control over their transformations, and since they attacked us on sight that doesn't say much for any supposed friendly intentions. So we are looking not just

at an army of werewolves, but of super-werewolves who can change on demand! Who knows what other upgrades they've gotten."

And truly there was nothing more to say about that.

Unfortunately for everyone, their attempted roundup did not go very well. Werewolves were fast, not threatened by the wooden soldiers, and knew this forest well. The clear majority of them escaped.

The statues of petrified werewolves they ended up transfiguring into plain boulders and stacking in a gully not far from the Hogwarts lake, outside of the Forbidden Forest. The ones that escaped they let go for now, deciding to be merciful and hoping they wouldn't get into too much trouble.

It wasn't much of a hope, but they didn't truly have the ability to chase them down either. Harry summoned Hedwig to take a note to Amelia, alerting her to the problem so she could get people to take precautions on the next full moon night. Then the fae children added 'research a cure for Lycanthrope' to their rather impressive list of things to do. That didn't mean they'd succeed, or even get close to one within their lifetimes, but it did mean they'd try to look into it when they could.

After that they soldiered on.

The next major battle for their wooden army came shortly after they'd gone passed an unexplained glass tower in the forbidden forest. Just as they were coming down a heavily overgrown slope the acromantulas met them en mass.

Those man-eating spiders were smart, and they came at them organized as an army themselves. The smaller and mid-sized spiders took to the tops of the trees where the wooden pikes couldn't get them and the compressed air rifle fire was partially blocked by many intervening layers of branches. It also meant they could bypass the infantry on the ground and strike directly at the much softer targets behind, jumping down on their heads.

The giant elephantine spiders attacked the front lines directly, smashing apart wooden soldiers as though they were so many twigs.

The acromantula menace actually outnumbered Harry's forces by a wide margin, ten to one at the least, and the initial surprise rush smashed most of the wooden army before Harry could give new orders.

The centaurs fled, knowing their speed was their best advantage. The fairies sped out until they began to get caught by webs, then they burned themselves free and retreated close to Harry. Blinky was staring in every direction as fast as she could turn her head about, transforming hundreds of spiders from horse size up to elephants to stone.

But then charged in a group of hippo sized spiders, nearly the biggest they had but substantially quicker than the elephant sized ones, with blindfolds of webbing wrapped around their eyes, rushing in to attack the basilisk at point blank range, their fangs and poison against its - and they had dozens of mouths to Blinky's one.

Harry was shocked, having never even imagined such tactics before.

His little army had been reduced to scattered bits in the first assault. His wooden soldiers were mostly down, the centaurs fled. His fairy swarms were holding together nicely and collected together in such a tight mass even their feeble flames were able to crisp any spiders that got close (which was the only thing saving Blinky, as the fairies counterattacked the blindfolded anti-basilisk squads of spiders), but he and his girls were all pressed together tightly in a cluster with his basilisk, the fairies, and a few wooden soldiers.

Then the giant acromantulas who had held back pushed trees down on top of the little cluster of survivors.

Lumberjacking is a dangerous profession because trees weighed several tons and could build up substantial momentum when they began falling. It could well be compared to a gigantic multi-ton mallet with a titan's arm behind it, and striking over a very wide area.

Quicker than anyone could have believed possible, Harry summoned both Susan and Hannah back into his pockets. The fairies were scattering in every which direction as he did so. Then the trees obscured everything as they hit with enough force to shake the forest.

Minutes later, three Nemean Lions came groggily to awareness, having just barely made the switch before the trees fell, and coming around to the voices of acromantulas arguing over who got to drain the blood and eat the flesh of the giant basilisk.

Blinky lay dead, having been crushed below falling trees and speared by branches. And the larger spiders had a tough time bullying the smaller ones not to swarm over her to feast upon their kill, even while arguing with each other over who got the largest or better portions.

A Nemean Lion was far from invulnerable, but it was magic that was their weakness, and a falling tree had virtually no magical energy. So the trio had survived an impact that could easily have pulped them despite their armor. The wooden horses they'd all been riding were mere splinters beneath them.

The acromantulas had not bought their victory without cost, either. There were countless hundreds of them petrified by the basilisk's gaze. Dozens had fallen to lucky shots from the air rifles of toy soldiers or arrows of fleeing centaurs. But considering the tens of thousands of spiders brought to the fight, the bugs losses were very slight.

That was, of course, until Harry got angry.

Squeezing himself out of the narrow crack he'd been stuck in under a branch that ought to have pulverized him had he not been a Nemean Lion when it hit, the boy inhaled and ROARED!

The challenge inherent in it was no bother, it was the wandless fire spell he accompanied that with that was the real threat. Their own immersion in the Goblet of Fire had granted them an affinity for those, as well as an immunity to flame and heat, and the resulting belch of flame caught webbing and shattered soldiers on fire and created an instant crisis for the giant spiders.

Among the many skills almost unique to man, the handling of fire stood high on the list. Acromantulas, as most beasts, had no ready answer for the fire that suddenly blazed into existence all around them, consuming webbing and roasting bodies, nor for the returning fairies that swarmed back in, heeding the call roared out by their Queen's champion and adding to the blaze with their own small skills at wandless flame charms.

Shattered wood from trees and soldiers quickly caught the blaze and spread it. Soon Luna and Hermione had pulled themselves free and added their own roars of wandless flame to this inferno. The spider forces were suddenly devastated, unable to escape quickly enough before they crisped and burned.

Harry popped back to his normal form long enough to rescue the corpse of Blinky before the blaze could do much to touch it, storing that away in his many safari pouches to be harvested later that day.

Then he had to think of an answer for the crisis he'd created.

He'd never intended to subject the Forbidden Forest to a forest fire, as once started those things were nearly impossible to stop. The acromantulas that had survived the initial blast of fire and heat were now in full retreat, racing away as fast as their multiple legs could carry them, heedless of the areas they had fought over or the succulent flesh they'd hoped to feast upon.

In the end Harry decided they had no better option than to do the same. The dryads were safe thanks to that ritual they'd been working on this month, and sanctuaries throughout the forest would shelter the good creatures and ordinary wildlife, while the bad he'd been hoping to drive out regardless, and there wasn't anything he could do to stop the forest fire he'd created.

It wasn't what he'd wanted, but it would work. It would do the job, the boy concluded as he dispatched the fireproof fairies to go throughout the forest searching out good creatures to lead to the sanctuaries - or to come warn him or his witches of any that needed special rescue.

Forest fires appear periodically in nature. Barring special circumstances, the forest would live. Most of the underbrush would be burned away, but the big trees would survive, if singed a little. And it did guarantee the place would be cleared out of evil creatures when he moved it, as the sanctuaries wouldn't take them, so they'd either die or flee out of the forest entirely.

He'd planned on something less drastic, but this would do nicely.

Actually, there was no reason to wait, so the boy moved the forest while it still burned, going in with freezing flame charms cast upon the staff he was using to set the boundaries and disappear with the forest that night.

It would reappear on the borders of his 40,000 acres, but only after Harry had finished using his remaining ward supplies to protect the place. And the creatures within would help vastly speed up his efforts to spread the magical hedge all around both properties as quickly as possible, eager to hide.

No one was anxious to have the forest reinfected with dark creatures. Nor, with all the troubles they felt were coming, did they think simple wards to be enough protection.

But the fire did cauterize it clean of all of the evils he'd meant to remove.

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Draco Malfoy was not a nice person.

Draco No-Name was actually a step worse, having picked up the old family habit of murdering your peers and rivals a trifle earlier than he would've had events proceeded normally.

But he'd always wanted to be a Death Eater, so despite some possible initial squeamishness, he'd have gotten to it soon enough. Armed with the Malfoy name he could afford to be arrogant, without it he was becoming vicious.

Draca No-Name, however, was an emotional wreck. Had been her entire short existence.

Draco had awakened early that morning to the sights and smells of the hospital and been both sore and grumpy, so immediately on waking had become his usual whiny, demanding self.

Draco had been raised by his father with the pureblood maxim: if you can't feel good, and won't let yourself feel bad, at least feel superior. And servants were meant to take abuse. However, no sooner had he alerted the nurses that he was awake than things had rapidly gone from bad to worse.

The grizzled old veterans from the Ministry who'd come into his room had been utterly unsympathetic to his plight. Those old people must have done this a hundred times to get as jaded as they'd become, but it was all routine to them to ignore his complaints and demands, restrain him, silence him, then perform a certain ritual Draco had only joked about before.

In his jokes, it was always his enemies receiving it.

This was always just the sort of thing he'd been most pleased to imagine his rivals undergoing, transforming into useless breeder sows, fit only to be the ones to bear the pregnancies of children conceived among pureblood parents, not even fit to provide genes for the brats they carried, just forced to get bloated bearing the brats to term so pureblood didn't get stretch marks.

That was a fitting punishment. Potter and his mudblood Granger were always going to have ended up this way. And lately that Loony Lovegood would've begged to get off with just that much.

Subject to it himself, Draco had had none of the laughter he'd spared for his opponents in his dreams. He cried. He raged. He threw tantrums that did not impress his captors any more than it did the walls of his padded chamber. He would have hurt someone had anyone tried to comfort him. But it did nothing to stop the implacable occurrence of the ritual.

Funny, but he'd struggled and whined and begged and pleaded just like he'd always imagined that Potter would. And he'd gotten shown more mercy than he would've granted his rival, in that no one stood gloating over Draco during the process of having his reproductive organs inverted, turning in instead of out and transforming to serve a different set of functions.

Mere minutes later, and he was now Draca, his gender permanently changed and a breeder contract left as reading material on her bedside table by those completely unsympathetic Ministry people.

It was a nightmare. It had to be. First his father dead, then Loony Lovegood getting his fortune, not having a family name, tortured by his godfather Snape in front of the whole Slytherin common room, and now this.

He was to breed a dozen brats each for Crabbe and Goyle!

Worse, he had to NURSE them! Only mudbloods and whores nursed children. It was unsanitary, undignified, and had to be against some law somewhere!

Draca recovered enough to beat her pillow. This was to have been Potter's fate! Her father had promised!

But now that infinitely powerful protective figure was gone.

It would have been possible to feel sorry for the former lad had it not been the case that he'd once laughed at people going through worse than this. In fact, he'd put people through suffering as often as possible, as frequently as his elevated station allowed; and if he'd recognized them, he might've known why the Ministry people had been so unsympathetic as he'd made enemies of their families, humiliating them at parties, and bullying their children at Hogwarts.

No, that had been an all-volunteer group to perform the procedure. One had even paid for the opportunity to get on the team.

It would have been possible to sympathize with the newly minted girl's tears had it not been the case that he'd already once before

arranged to do this to an enemy younger than himself, and that was done only in a fit of childish pique, just to prove his superiority to the lesser family. Lucius had been all too happy to apply the leverage to actually make it happen.

It was hard to sympathize with an arsonist finally getting burned.

Draco had seen his place in the world as the one showing off his superiority by dishing out grief to others, not unlike Dudley Dursley.

Now a girl, Draca had her purpose in life laid out for her along different lines.

Physically exhausted from throwing her fits, emotionally worn out from the same tantrums, and dazed by all that happened to her, it was hours before the cold rage overtook her and awakened her Slytherin cunning.

A girl could bear four children in three years one after another. For muggles that would destroy her body, but with magic it would be alright. Then if she made it twins each time (that could also be arranged by the right potions) she could execute this entire contract in nine years at no risk to herself. It would be undignified and disgusting, but it was going to be that either way, best if she could get it all out of the way as soon as possible.

That would free her to get her revenge.

Oh, she would have her money. The heirs of two pureblood lines would be left in her care. She could teach them and mold them, turn them into her loyal servants, all devoted to 'Mommy-Dearest'. Then their fathers would die and she could employ herself as guardian of the underaged lords, her children.

She could be practicing with her wand towards her revenge all that time.

Draca was halfway through daydreams where one of her spawn had been engaged to one of Luna's, then married, only for both the blonde Ravenclaw and her daughter to die tragically, leaving Draca

once again in control of the Malfoy fortune, this time through her son who'd loyally turn it over to her, when the door to her private padded hospital room swung open, revealing a set of grim-faced aurors.

Moments later Draca got dragged out and before the Wizengamot wearing a transfigured set of convict's robes where she was brought up on charges for the attempted murder of Luna Darling, a copy of the newspaper article titled 'Murder Most Foul' and the accompanying picture of him shoving Luna off the top of the Astronomy tower went in as evidence.

Minutes later the former boy was convicted then sent to Azkaban, although in light of her breeder contract, she would be allowed conjugal visits.

Magical Justice was not always just, but it was swift.

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The girls watched that evening as Harry used some portion of the immense stockpile of phoenix tears Albus had stored up (Dumbledore had barrels of the stuff stored away, that the trio had then naturally stolen as they'd emptied out his stores of virtually everything else) to heal the graphorn.

"Tomorrow we can do some diagnostics of Bella. She was so close to death I don't know, even with that no-wilting charm, if we'll have much time to save her. So I don't know whether to have all of us stand around her and pour this on her wounds, or just to dunk her in a barrel - although I hate the waste. No matter how much we have on hand, Fawkes is gone. We won't get more."

Luna grunted in amusement. "Just wait a few more days."

Hermione lofted an eyebrow to her friend, but answered Harry with her own observations, "I hope Bella lives. I like this version of her. Her oath did give me an idea that you might use. Namely, just who did the Death Eaters swear to? Tom Riddle or Lord Voldemort? As the name Lord Voldemort is fictitious, Harry could proclaim himself

the true Lord Voldemort. Thus taking control of the oaths sworn to that title."

Harry and Luna both froze in stunned thought.

"Do we have to bring her back?" Susan asked, not terribly comfortable with the idea of bringing so notorious a Death Eater back.

Hannah nodded fervently along with her closest friend, adding, "She is one of the most terrible supporters of the Dark Lord in history."

But Hermione was already happily rattling on her favorite topic. "I think what Bellatrix did was wonderful. I can see the students' mannerisms in the library shift to meek, guarded and humble any time they're in there. Not to mention the fact that it's likely to stay quiet as no one would dare use an 'outside voice' any longer. That will make it so much easier to study. Not to mention under Dumbledore, most of magical history was either suppressed, exaggerated, incomplete, inaccurate or just plain false. So it'll be nice to see the truth for once. You have to deplore what he's done to our educations!"

Harry shook his head in wonder. "I'm still trying to wrap my mind around your earlier suggestion. That would be devastating, if it could work."

"You don't know for certain?" Hermione asked, puzzled, he knew all about how Tom Riddle made the marks, after all.

"No one's ever done that before," Luna observed, wide-eyed.

Harry was deep in consideration. "The theory seems sound, but we'd have to check and do some testing. I don't want to inherit more than his followers. For example, if any oaths to wage war on muggleborns came along with the title - they might, you know. Magic has a way of doing things like that."

Luna shook her head regretfully. "Wouldn't want to change sides just when we're doing so well."

"But it might work," Harry informed her hopefully. "And I couldn't think of anything more useful than to steal most of our enemy's followers."

"Why are we still fighting? We've won!" Susan protested, blurting out her feelings suddenly, no longer able to stand the question. "The Headmaster is stone, and a plushy at that, Snape is a steaming pile of animal dung out there somewhere and out of the picture entirely, and their heavily warded ritual chamber is collapsed! So no one can get to those horcruxes, no matter what spells Dumbledore used to compulse them to try. And without his phoenix to fetch him back, we could leave him to gather dust in the Chamber of Secrets for all time! Or smash him to bits with a sledgehammer and hide his rubble. We've won! So why is Harry still preparing to fight a war?"

"Oh, hush," Luna scolded, "it's best to let his mania for defense pass of its own accord. And we may be grateful for it someday, as there are other foes than Dumbledore. Besides, the magical economy is going to benefit powerfully from all of the financial moves he's making, as well as industries he's setting up. We'll be ages just cleaning up the messes the Headmaster left behind."

Hannah sighed, then brightened. "Well, I'm glad at least Draco has no money and is in Azkaban. He was always an unholy terror around school. I can't believe they didn't expel him for all he's done!"

Harry suddenly grinned. "Actually, McGonagall did. That was one of those papers we had her sign to get rid of us when we were Ghostbusters. Firing Snape was another, but she didn't read them."

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End Book 1

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Author's Notes:

Wow! I get this giddy feeling, like I've done some humongously wonderful thing like, I dunno, blown up a Death Star or something. The Empire is defeated, their superweapon destroyed.

Nothing could possibly cause them to strike back now, right?

Chapter Fifty-Eight by Lionheart

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Albus Dumbledore, in his multicolored, genial, grandfatherly self, wandered through the Ministry of Magic stopping and chatting with people, visiting desk after desk as he made his rounds.

This was quite reassuring to the Ministry people, who'd heard more than a few disturbing rumors and reports concerning the Headmaster. So to see him back in his pleasant, peaceful form was very reassuring to people.

It was also a lie.

Harry Potter under polyjuice to look like the Headmaster (they had captured plenty of his hairs on various raids to his office) and wearing some of his brightest outfits (they'd also captured plenty of his clothes) was doing the rounds using legilimency to determine what people expected of the kindly old Headmaster and do that in his social interactions, inquiring about the healths of people he'd never heard of, and referring to past experiences he knew nothing about, but the people he was talking to expected of the Headmaster.

Under this genial screen, and with the actual Headmaster unavailable, so unable to refute him, Harry was visiting any number of offices of the Ministry and quietly steamrolling through a rather large agenda.

Amelia Bones had suggested something that just HAD to be done!!

Under a feudal system settlements could have their own rights and privileges in the same way that nobles and clergy did. These were called City Rights, as any town that got them immediately became known as a city, although size did not appear to make any difference, as the smallest of these cities had only 40 people living there. NOT forty thousand, but four times ten, as in less than fifty, residents.

Amelia Bones had suggested granting autonomy to Godric's Hollow by allowing them to apply for those city rights, as they included the

right to self-police, which meant removing them from the Ministry's detection net so they could get away with more. The downside was they were on their own. They couldn't count on any support or help from the Ministry in case of disaster or attack. However, that was fine by Harry. The Ministry did more harm than good.

Then, in order to tweak Dumbledore's nose, Amelia went ahead and gave the town official approval on her authority as Head of Magical Law Enforcement. This was good, but not impenetrable. It could be overruled, either by higher Ministry officials or Amelia's replacement (whoever that turned out to be) so long as they trumped up a charge.

So Harry was visiting the Ministry disguised as Dumbledore, using the old man's political power and influence to sew this up from every department, getting approval from every Ministry official worth the name, and throwing the considerable might of Dumbledore's political muscle behind not only that, but going the extra step to granting the town a medieval charter as a free and independent city, meaning it was a government on its own, declared by the bumbling Ministry to be no longer subject to their legal authority.

That put it very much out of Dumbledore's reach, and exempt the place from the authority of aurors, obliviators, underage magic detection, or any other enforcement arm short of a direct order by the Queen. It also enabled the town to keep their own police force made up of whatever they wanted it to be, and provide justice for all crimes short of high treason.

It also meant the town had the right to govern its own trade, so any Ministry granted monopolies didn't mean squat inside of the town borders. And if that didn't lead to an explosion of new business and creativity, Harry didn't know what would. Freedom always meant an explosion of invention, and NONE of the Ministry's stupidly restrictive laws applied there anymore.

So they could keep dragons, use magic carpets, buy or sell printing presses or enchant muggle artifacts if they wished. And yes, you didn't have to pay a fee to keep pets or register your cauldron bottom thickness.

Amelia was very happy to have her ancestral estate already moved there and under those new freedoms, and was moving post-haste to help get the pots of plant protection going swiftly, so the town would have its own industry.

Harry had already installed Frank and Alice Longbottom as the town sheriff and head of their school, respectively. Amelia would be mayor. They'd already worked it out so administrative details would be handled by a Town Council, NOT any part of the Ministry. As obligations and other rules are plainly set out in the original charter, and Amelia was trying to be generous in order to save them from Dumbledore, they had quite a bit of leeway. Indeed, they were essentially an independent city state in the heart of England. Legally, the Ministry surrendered all power over them.

Among their many privileges, the city of Godric's Hollow was allowed to make their own laws governing itself. Among the first they passed (after the basic working set required to run any society) was that possessing a dark mark within the town boundaries was an automatic death sentence.

About the only downside to this arrangement was they had to provide all their own infrastructure, their own floo network and so on. But that was actually a benefit in many ways, as doing their own they could be sure it would be more secure.

The ability to run their own floo control node and merely interface that with the regular British system meant when they put restrictions on who could go where by floo, no Death Eater, toady, stooge or sympathizer in the Ministry could simply undo it! Those controls weren't on their end!

But, to be extra safe (it was that kind of town) they also warded their floos on the receiving end, so there was a double defense against unauthorized intrusion. And better still for security if they could somehow mark town residents as having unrestricted floo travel access, and allow in no one else.

He could have stopped there, but didn't.

in the four hundred homes Harry expected to build at Godric's Hollow, even if he achieved an average occupancy rate of five per home (two parents and three kids, a little above the norm), that would still take only two thousand of the magical populace out of the rest of the British total.

Given a magical birthrate of something on the order of one witch or wizard per thousand normal people, the magical society of Great Britain ought to have a population of around sixty thousand. But in actual fact, due to deaths and emigrations due to their recent wars, actual numbers were something on the order of thirty to forty thousand magical people living there. So Harry Potter's two thousand estimate for people protected in Godric's Hollow was an insignificant chunk of the total. And truthfully those numbers assumed a great deal more children than really existed. Pie in the sky estimates aside, actual occupancy would be closer to one thousand than two.

Protecting one or two thousand while leaving thirty or forty vulnerable to attack was not good coverage. Also filling up to capacity right at the start left his town very little room for growth later on down the road.

So because he already had far more applicants for worthwhile magical people wanting to move to Godric's Hollow than he had space to keep them, Harry adopted the 'do not keep all your eggs in one basket' philosophy, and, rather than make the town any larger, simply applied as Dumbledore for five more licenses for such towns to be applied for on Harry's behalf, then approved.

Better still, this could all be accomplished via a minor amendment to what the Geezergamot had already granted him, under that neat little permission to "buy up some land around my parents' old house" Harry had never actually said WHICH HOUSE! So 'Dumbledore' kindly got it applied to many of them.

The Potters had very obligingly lived in several mixed magical/muggle villages during the time they'd been fighting vulturewart. All of them very much like the muggle side of Godric's Hollow: quiet little holes in the country that young people moved out of and the world by and large had forgotten.

Places that would never be missed if they disappeared off the maps.

Thus they got Ravenshire, Rowena's Glen, Huffle Hollow, Puffville and Gryffin Harbor, the only seacoast town. The muggles had the coasts pretty sewn up with their own settlements, so it was a bit of work to find a spot inhospitable enough they'd never miss it, and could be cleared out for a town, yet had a small community his parents had lived in. Without dwarven stonemasons and magic, Harry didn't even think they could have adapted the one they found.

He felt no need to venerate Slytherin, as the pureblood elitists were already doing enough of that. And this alleviated another problem Harry had been having in that there was more than one tribe of dwarves in Britain, and the other clan heads had begun to contact him, essentially asking, "When is it our turn?" Apparently the outcast dwarves all wanted homes, were willing to work for them, and liked the deal he'd offered the first clan he'd contacted.

Now he had deals he could make with them, offering more mines in Sweden, Norway, and this time one in Scotland, in exchange for their building the new magical villages for him, all pretty much patterned after the first one as far as the building philosophy and security were concerned.

He didn't think he could order them to be made the same artistically, as each clan of dwarves had their own style of decorations and would be mightily offended if he'd so much as tried to tell them to emulate another. The first clan he'd dealt with, the one to build Godric's Hollow into its present form, had done an admirable job with their style of decorating, very Celtic in a way that the rest of the world had lost as far as knowledge of the Celts, and he was rather looking forward to what the other clans would come up with.

But in the meantime he made sure they had all of the same City Rights and privileges that he was arranging for his first fortress town.

In a way it was excellent even beyond his original designs to have more than one such fortified settlement, as the way war worked no one attacking force could afford to entirely turn its attention to one

without turning its back on the others. So the mere presence of extra towns assured a greater measure of safety. And with the speed of magical transport, actual physical distance between the settlements was almost irrelevant for this support to apply.

Just to make certain all angles were covered, Harry was signing them up for every right a city might conceivably possess, including especially the right to construct defensive fortifications - because just about every Ministry toady could take one look at his villas and claim he'd already broken the limit.

In the magical world, just like the Middle Ages, the right of a settlement to build a defensive wall was a privilege, usually granted by the so-called "right of crenelation," and now that Harry thought about it that might be a very good idea. City walls had existed for a reason, and that reason was pretty much the same one he was facing now: gangs of armed thugs roaming the countryside in search of easy pickings, vandalism and loot.

Yes, his HOUSES were defended against that sort of thing, but it meant ever so much more to layer one strong defense over another, and the villas could be merely a fallback position; the "Yes, you've broken through my town wall, now your house to house fighting is going to be pure misery" approach.

Because, really, the farther away you could keep an enemy the less harm he could do to you. And the more stages he had to get through to hurt you, the longer and more effort it took him, and the more possibilities you had to deal out hurt and damage in return as he sought to get through to you.

A dog might find a porcupine the tastiest thing on Earth, but that didn't mean they got to eat them often. The pain of obtaining wasn't worth it.

The same thing applied here. And if you tore open the porcupine's quills only to find a badger revealed underneath, then got through that amazingly thick hide to open it up and find a lion springing out at you... well, the meal wasn't worth the effort spent getting it, whatever the flavor was.

What they wanted was commonly styled 'defense in depth', and it got called that for a reason, namely in that it served like an onion: there were multiple levels of barricades and obstacles to be overcome before your enemy could have any expectation of getting through. Each layer he got through only gave him access to the next layer beyond. And, since you wanted to be firing on him as he made this approach, he paid in blood for every step of ground. So that in the end he either decided that it wasn't worth it or ran out of blood to spill. He either lost his will or his life trying, while hopefully you lost none.

Having nearly impregnable family villas was a good step, but it was still only one stage to be passed through.

So Harry decided he would fortify their towns too and sent that instruction off to his dwarven allies, as they were willing to begin construction even as he was still using Dumbledore's revered image to secure the rights.

On being given the command to put up city walls the dwarven engineers made their evaluations and decided on having concentric rings, high and circular in the Medieval style to avoid nasty things like infantry rushes.

Werewolves and zombies were not sophisticated warriors. If they couldn't charge it and overbear it in a rush they largely couldn't do anything about it.

And the late medieval style excelled at stopping infantry rushes like that.

When it came right down to it, the more things you had defending you the less an enemy was likely to even try an attack. Yes, church bells could drive off dementors, but they couldn't pass through solid walls either. So should the wards be somehow broken and bells destroyed, they'd still have to pass through the gate, and keeping that shut was always a good idea during siege.

Giants too, could be hopped up on potions to overpower your stone guardians. But scrambling over a big stone wall would at least slow

them down and give your defenders a few moments while they were doing that during which their movements would be hindered and awkward - and if they were vulnerable at any time, that was it.

Tall, high, really obvious crosses could be built directly into the walls just by using different colored blocks of stone during the construction, and once those had been blessed by a priest for good measure, no vampires would even be able to tolerate coming within sight of the place.

And werewolves had the same difficulty with really tall, thick walls that any wolf did. Namely, to them it was an impassible barrier unless someone else opened up a pathway through for them. This was fortunate, as werewolves were notoriously resistant to defensive magic when in their wolf form.

No, a town wall was an excellent thing to add to their overall defenses.

There were plenty of good examples on how to do this, centuries of good and bad experiences on record to tell what worked and what didn't, as well as what worked well against some kinds of things yet poorly against others. The art and science of laying siege to a fortification, as well as building new ones to resist the latest methods of destroying them, had been growing and accumulating data since the time of ancient Rome. Some times had been so turbulent that you simply didn't build a town without putting a wall around it.

So a tremendous body of lore had been collected. However, all of that got more or less abandoned with the development of cannon. The high but thin medieval walls shattered easily so they quickly got lower and thicker until you had fortifications moved entirely underground, developing into the bunker. Then people developed bunker busters to break even those.

As the power of high explosives continued to improve, muggles used fewer and fewer permanent fortifications of any kind until, overall, they used none.

Muggle warfare was weighted rather heavily toward offensive holding the advantage at present. But it wasn't always so, and could easily

surprise people by how quickly that equation could change with just a few different rules. For example, defense had once been considered to have by far the advantage, and it was the advent of high explosives that changed that.

But, with magic, they had a defense against those no muggle could dream of. Harry could simply set down unobtrusive spells that would cause any high explosive compounds coming within a mile of Godric's Hollow to explode spontaneously, just on the odd chance Tom would reach back to his muggle roots in attacking the place. No bombs or exploding artillery shells for him!

Heck, no firearms for that matter. He could set spells to detonate gunpowder at any distance he cared to.

Remove high explosives from the equation and it became a whole different ball game. Once more defense had the advantage. The best Voldy could do would be to drop non-exploding shells, against which there were plenty of centuries of developing methods of defense.

And that wasn't too much of a worry for Harry. They could have the dwarves build their walls uncommonly thick and sturdy, then magnify that with magic. But, just to stay several steps ahead of the opposition, they also saw the benefit of including outerworks of the later sorts made for defense against cannon, sheltering the inner walls against direct fire; because while neither Tom nor Dumbledore had any cannon, Tom did frequently use giants, which could pitch rocks better than any of the ancient black powder field pieces.

After that, they went to town, quite literally.

Having a town wall meant gatehouses. Gatehouses meant gates that could be closed in the face of an open assault (or, for general precaution, at night). It also gave them a perfect spot to have checkpoints inspecting any visitors arriving overland, making sure they were not under compulsion and had no Dark Marks. A few guards at each entrance armed with Probitry Probes and glasses that functioned like Moody's magical eye, backed up by large guardian statues, made for a fairly tight security checkpoint.

Hogwarts had enchantments for preventing anyone from flying or climbing over the walls while they were activated. Employ those on the town walls and people had to arrive either by land or floo, and funneling agents through those checkpoints would be hard enough that, while the dark powers could probably come up with ways eventually to sneak in a few agents, it would be hard enough that massive overpowering assaults on the houses within would be impossible while the town walls were still defended.

It didn't have to be perfect to make all the individual families much safer and greatly complicate the life of anyone trying to launch a direct attack on one.

With checkpoints like that, naturally any invader would prefer to arrive by floo, skipping around those nasty town walls entirely. And that could be made to play right into your hands.

Harry's devious friends specially enchanted all of the fireplaces in town, charming the fires to burn to ash any vampire attempting to pass through them, and to mortally burn any hag. Both of those had to prey upon human life in order to survive, so if they had rights to live then humans didn't. You couldn't treat something that had to eat you to live as an equal. Either you treated them like vermin and wiped them out, or they devoured you. There was no equality that could be had in that kind of relationship.

Harry and company preferred that humanity survived. And, while they were at it, put in charms to burn to death any marked Death Eaters attempting to use the town's floo system.

Yes, they could defend against that. But the first couple of times they would not know they had to, and it would come as an unpleasant surprise, killing at least a few of them. Because who carried their wand out while flooing? Only those who wanted to lose it to all of the spinning and tumbling, that's who.

That, plus those other traps and tricks over the town's private floo system and very few people would want to challenge it, as that would not be the easy way in. Then again, the whole point of this was for there not to be any easy way in, for the Dark supporters, at least. But

thanks to selective magic, it ought to be easy as pie for Light residents to come as go as they liked.

Still, if they couldn't enter using your floo network, fly overhead or easily cheat or fool your gate checkpoints, sooner or later they'd try attacking the walls directly, trying to bring them down to create their own entrance. And if they wanted to try siege, wizards were perfectly capable of banishing large rocks over great distances with the force of a cannonball. For that matter, the giants Harry expected to serve the enemy could heave boulders greater and farther with as much destructive force as a medieval siege cannon.

But there were fully developed ways to defend against medieval cannon. You simply build up a berm of earth in front of your walls to prevent direct fire. The ancient cannons of those days had to fire in a more or less straight line to do any real damage, just like a baseball pitcher throws balls, and dirt was the best bullet-stop ever invented. It could absorb just about anything they tried to throw at it. It would be like trying to shoot through a hill.

In short, inside you had your wall, then a large empty space, then a ridge of earth surrounding your town. The trouble there was that you then had to prevent your enemy from occupying that man-made hill and simply putting his cannon up there. But that, too, had been dealt with in vast, elaborate designs of intricate outerworks that came to be known as star forts.

These forts developed complex shapes that allowed defensive batteries of cannon to command interlocking fields of fire. Forward batteries commanded the slopes which defended walls deeper in the complex from direct fire. The defending cannon were not simply intended to deal with attempts to storm the walls, but to actively challenge attacking cannon, and deny them approach close enough to the fort to engage in direct fire against the vulnerable walls. Moats and fortified islands had all been involved.

After a bit of research during which Hermione shone, they decided to base their town plans on the ancient defenses of Palmanova, one of the most fortified cities of this type they could find plans of, with

multiple nested defensive works each of them able to stand on its own if necessary.

That tiny town was a fortress in the shape of an eighteen-pointed star, using all the latest military innovations of the 16th century. Streets were laid out in a radial pattern within polygonal fortifications and extensive outer earthworks. In between the points of the star, ramparts protruded so that the points could defend each other. A moat surrounded the town, and three large, guarded gates allowed entry. Although, because the purebloods could read history books and town maps too, they changed the design at Godric's Hollow to enlarge the area slightly, and changed the location of the gates and interior layouts of other important security features.

The invention of high explosives made plunging shots damaging enough to be viable. And as explosives grew more powerful, fortifications mattered less and less until they largely died out altogether. But again, if any explosives detonated before coming within a mile of your walls that shouldn't concern you, so these walls ought to do just fine.

However, the problem with those later designs was they presumed a great many men and a large number of cannon actively defending them. And Harry did not have a great many men willing or able to fight. If he did, he wouldn't need to fort up like a turtle and wait for the enemy to come to him. He could go out there and take the war to them and see how they liked being on the receiving end, with their homes and families being destroyed for once.

But, "If wishes were fishes then beggars would eat." He didn't have the men, so he had to build forts, and to man those forts he needed more men.

Actually, what he really needed was combatants, not necessarily men. So, if he were to whip up, say, a few thousand terra cotta soldiers and a couple hundred animated cannon to handle the actual fighting, he could use his limited supply of wizards as scouts and commanders, and that he had about enough for. Oh, they couldn't be actual cannon, not if he planned to be around (and since he was his side's top fighter, he had to at least consider using himself as a mobile reserve) as his

fey powers would destroy them. But the dear things could be giant arms lobbing stones and work just as well.

Inwardly, Harry smirked. He could do this. And what was better was this was far from the only thing he'd be doing using Dumbledore's beloved face and form. Already he had a petition he was ramming through, signed by nearly two hundred witches and wizards, for making the word "mudblood" taboo, along with the incantations for all of the Unforgivable curses.

Right after that was a proposal to set aside a small island for the Potter Family Memorial Werewolf Reserve where lycanthropes could be portkeyed on the full moon so they would not be a danger to anyone.

And that could be used to clarify the Ministry's werewolf policies nicely: you accept a reusable, non-removable portkey collar that automatically kicks in every full moon to remove you from where you can endanger anyone, and you are acknowledged as a 'tame' werewolf and get much closer to human rights.

If not, you are a feral werewolf, and not only do the full spectrum of anti-werewolf laws apply to you, aurors are authorized and instructed to shoot to kill on sight any lycanthrope spotted transformed outside the reserve.

You are either helping to provide a solution, or you are part of the problem.

A few minutes after those projects got completed, Harry would go before the Geezergamot as Dumbledore and publicly request all Dumbledore's proxy holdings and guardianships be revoked. Then he'd demand that investigations be launched into certain longstanding crimes - all of which Dumbledore was behind, and had previously been blocking investigations into.

Then, if THAT didn't destroy the old man's reputation, as that tangle got unraveled and clan after clan found out just to what extent he'd been robbing from them, he'd start to get truly weird.

At the end of a long day of politicking, Harry returned to his villa in Godric's Hollow, dropping the Dumbledore disguise and starting to remove the hideous robes when he saw Hermione and Luna waiting for him, both eager to hear his report of how the day went.

After an accurate summary, he shook his head, declaring, "You know, it's both amazing and dismaying how many people are bought into the myth that their government is all-powerful, benign and all-loving, and will take care of all of your problems for you. Mostly it belongs to people like Dumbledore!"

Hermione cocked her head at him. "Magicals aren't the only people who think that of their government, Harry. It's not a failing unique to wizard-kind. Most people feel that because that's what most governments tell their subjects. They cry about how giving your problems to the government is the only way to solve them, even though most of those were problems the government actually created in the first place; not unlike Dumbledore, actually, just on a massive, worldwide scale. People like Percy never have enough authority or power to suit their ambitions. So they're always out for more."

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Author's Notes:

The best way to destroy entrenched political power is to get the one holding it to destroy himself. And thanks to the power of Polyjuice, you can help!

Chapter Fifty-Nine
by Lionheart

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The French government was not without favors it could call in. Actually, all they had to do was relax their opposition on certain matters to other states and they had some rather large political capitol to turn in.

And while the government and people of magical Britain had been conditioned carefully over the years to throw off any allegations of wrongdoing on the Headbastard's part, France would not agree with Britain on the weather.

They had been recipient of an outright act of war, and students of their magical school were being held in durance vile in the British magical school, and they were not apt to simply forget the matter.

The French ambassador to the ICW had also noticed the last two times they had called emergency meetings of that august body, Dumbledore had chosen not to attend. Very bad form, and considering the office he held a few more times and he'd be forced to abdicate his position without a fight.

The Head of the International Confederation was not allowed to simply not show up without presenting reasonable excuse, and they had received none.

So, of course, the French ambassador was using any legitimate excuse to call every emergency meeting he could. One more after this one would be to remove the Headbastard from his position, since by then he would have been absent without notice from three consecutive emergency sessions.

Not even Dumbledore's tightest allies could ask to keep him in office then, and they were beginning to realize it. Many of Dumbledore's allies had begun to subtly distance themselves from the old man.

Internationally, he was steadily becoming political poison.

One of the many reasons the previously untouchable man was losing his place as the essential figure in all political landscapes were the many artifacts that were being smuggled out of England, and the French ambassador had to suppress a grin as he entered the ICW council chambers to see one of the most recent of those gems, a smuggled out poster, reading over a smiling Dumbledore face, "Trust the Headmaster! The Headmaster is your friend. Failure to trust the Headmaster is treason. Treason is punishable by death!"

Yes, it would do the Headmaster's cause no good for his allies to be holding a meeting under the gaze of his image bearing those words.

Nor was that the only blow to his esteem. The members of that body had listened again to the recording of Dumbledore ordering the most recent Dark Lord to be brought back as a distraction, and Crucio his servant when questioned on it.

Almost overlooked in the rest of this scandal, an article printed in the latest issue of the Quibbler "Practical Defenses Against Mind Readers", pointed out that both Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore were practiced mind readers who routinely scanned the thoughts of all those who met them. There was a substantial subculture forming that wouldn't meet Dumbledore in the eyes even if he did show up for one of these meetings.

Also, another article in the Quibbler contained a transcript of that prophecy session between Dumbledore and his pet oracle, word for word, including his questions to her about controlling Harry Potter, had created quite a stir.

Not everyone had been idly waiting for the Twinkling Tyrant's response to these allegations. Nor were even his allies pleased about the man being prophetically termed a spider.

This meeting of the ICW had been called for one reason alone - it was now conclusively proven that Dumbledore was the sole proprietor and owner of the former British newspaper the Daily Prophet, and they'd obtained a few of his former employees who, upon being stripped of their secrecy oaths, were now willing to testify

as to how the man ran that newspaper as a way to coerce all of Magical Britain to believe him and obey his whims.

Another blow or two like that one and the Magical Nations of the World would be willing to openly label the old Headbastard as a Dark Lord.

He already bore that title in France.

Just as he had fought off a smile, the French ambassador then fought off a grimace. They would need every aid they could get. Tyrants could only wish they had as much control as this man did. It was like trying to pull out vanilla bean flavor from ice cream to remove his tentacles from government. Half the offices necessary to removing him were held solely by the man himself!

Also even now, those who owed their entire political careers to the old man, sadly more than half the representatives to this very government, still had many who were willing to wage major political campaigns to protect him

But the French would prevail.

It was only Britain's web of alliances that prevented French troops from landing on her soil. But all those were being slowly but steadily stripped away. There simply was no defending a man who was being constantly exposed on countless fronts as having concealed crimes worse than Grindelwald's.

And there was no way he was being let off for having virtually declared war on France.

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When they next returned to the transplanted Forbidden Forest, but before they could begin, the trio had to deal with one or two little problems just a little too dangerous to bring their new pair of friends along for.

One of these was the previously overlooked fact that Hagrid's Blast Ended Skrewts were admitted to be a cross between Fire Crabs and a Manticore, and well, it turned out the Groundskeeper had a tidy little stash of his own hidden magical animals secreted inside the bounds of the Forbidden Forest.

Fluffy was the guard over this collection. And there were enough anti-flame spells up, left over from the time he'd gotten a dragon and wanted to move it here once it was large enough to be on its own (Hagrid had chiefly given up Norbert so he could spend time with other dragons) that this part of the forest remained unburnt.

"Well, now we know why he always wanted a dragon," Hermione looked around the secret menagerie wide-eyed. "It's one of the few things he DOESN'T have represented here!"

Harry nodded, looking at the odd combinations of sod huts and knotted ropes that served as containment of some of the most dangerous beasts. Danger was also debatable, there were things running free that HE was frightened of! Staring about in shock, he mumbled, "We might just have to recruit him. I don't see anyone but a half-giant able to manage this place."

Hermione frowned. "The trouble with that is he's far too loyal to Dumbledore. Even on the day the Prophet came out, magically convincing people of all the Headmaster had done, Hagrid didn't join in the escape. He stayed behind."

Luna tugged on both of their arms, pleading, "Could we discuss this somewhere less fantastically dangerous?"

Looking at her, both others came to the conclusion that if their favorite magical beast expert was as frightened as she looked, they ought to get out of there, they departed, getting a bit turned around as they avoided a pair of redcaps that were just wandering free.

"What are THEY doing here!?! " Hermione quietly shrieked, once they were safely passed. "Redcaps can only dwell where human blood has been spilled!"

"Hush, Hermione," Harry soothed. "You know Hagrid. He's too gentle to do any of the violent things you might be thinking. He probably bought some that a dealer had stolen from a muggle blood drive for vampires to consume, then just poured it around so his 'wee friends' could have a place to stay."

"That's true." The girl relaxed, mollified.

Harry inhaled, then exhaled deeply, centering himself. "Actually, I'm a bit glad they are here. It means we don't need a half-giant to care for this collection of fur rending slaughter machines Hagrid calls pets."

"Oh?" Both girls looked to him curiously.

"Uh huh," he nodded. "Think about it. We are fairy champions, with authority to speak for the Queen. Redcaps are fairy creatures, although not very nice ones, definitely Unseelie. Anyway, in absence of any direct commands from the Shadow Court we can dominate them. Then they'd have to obey our instructions, and we can tell THEM to control this seething mass of teeth and claws for us."

"There is no Shadow Court," Luna told him firmly.

"Huh?" both others turned to look at the expert.

Luna simply shook her head wisely. "Faeries are personifications of nature, and nature can be both kind and cruel. The races of the fae reflect that, but the cruel side is both random and capricious, not organized. If nature were to coordinate itself and act deliberately destructive nothing could survive her wrath. The idea they do is muggle superstition. The Fairy Queen is queen over all fae, not just a part. She is their sole creator and only ruler."

"Well THAT'S a relief!" Hermione sighed in relief, putting a hand to her chest.

Harry grinned sardonically. "Yeah, I have to admit that's one for me too."

Luna turned a frightened gaze on Harry. "Just be careful giving them orders. Redcaps don't respect any kind of authority. They'll try to kill you, Queen's Champion or no, and are fantastically strong for their size."

"Couldn't you just order them not to hurt you?" Hermione was puzzled.

Luna shook her head. "Could you order a cat to fly? No. You can't order a creature to do something outside of its ability, and redcaps basically **MUST** kill when or where they are able - humans only, obviously. They can leave plants, animals and most creatures alone. But anything too human-like in appearance, they'll kill just to be sure. They are more mindlessly violent than the most deranged human sociopath. It is their nature."

Harry smiled. "Luckily, I happen to know the charms and hexes that drive them off. With everything else going on, I just forgot to use them earlier."

"We'll get ready to run anyway," Luna offered.

In the end, that venture was both a success and failure. Harry was able to give the orders needed for the dwarflike creatures to take care of the rest of the beasts in Hagrid's collection (and they were tough enough to pull it off). But they also ended up resisting his charms somewhat and chasing the trio halfway through the forest.

It took them some time to find their way back to know paths.

They did find the Weasley's car, however. The Ford Angelina that had run off into the forest during their second year was now quite beat up. They found it smashed up against a tree with several club marks on it from trolls, the poor car was burned down to bare metal, interior reduced to ashes, covered in the remnants of burned webbing, and stuck in mud too deep for it to get out of.

They found it that way because Hermione heard the horn honking from where they had been chased. When they followed the sounds of the horn they found the car spinning its bare wheel rims in the mud, hopelessly stuck, yet still trying to escape from the pair of wild nifflers

that had begun to chew on its metal parts as it honked its horn in distress.

The trio drove off the nifflers with a few spells, then had compassion on the car and began fixing it up with repair spells. Hermione found particular use for the one spell she'd used on Harry's glasses several times since their first year together, as all of the Angelina's windows and headlights had been smashed out at some point in the car's recent past. Harry primarily did body work, straightening out the frame where impacts from clubs and trees and things had smashed it, while Luna used homemaking and sewing charms to replace the missing interior and paint job (taking the opportunity to turn it a deeper shade of blue. Harry stopped her before she could sprinkle little white stars like the night sky over it, saying it would draw too much attention if it ever went out on muggle streets again).

Harry transfigured it fresh tires, and even did a businesslike check of the car's fluids (having been tasked to do so on the Dursleys automobiles for years), and Hermione responded to low radiator fluid (it had been smashed up in several crashes) by fetching water out of a nearby stream and topping it off.

Finally Luna transfigured the mud underneath its tires into hard cobblestones and they all expected the car to drive away. It did for a bit, hiding behind a tree as if afraid they would chase it, but when they casually began walking back the way they'd come they discovered they had acquired a follower.

"I think we're being watched," Luna smugly asserted as the car raced up to hide behind another tree not far behind them.

"I think it's odd to have something so big behaving like a puppy," Hermione agreed, as the enspelled automobile waggled its rear end and dashed off to one side of them to hide behind another tree.

"It'll probably stay behind in the forest," Harry asserted.

But it didn't.

At first the car hung out just inside the tree edge when they left it to go cross the lawn back towards the lake, where they'd agreed to meet Firenze, but after they'd gone a couple hundred yards they found the Angelina rolling up alongside them. It even opened its doors for them.

"No, thank you." Hermione fought hard to keep off a grin. "We are going to meet our exercise instructor, and it would be counter-productive to ride there."

With that, the car obediently closed its doors. It shadowed them all the way there, however.

The Forbidden Forest, nee Creature Sanctuary, didn't seem to be the same without a lake nearby, so Harry had taken a small trip to grab a bit of glacier with that magical staff for transporting property, then put that in the right place to melt into an appropriate lake nearby the forest.

That would grant them a very large lake, but would take time.

The lake they were going to was one on Harry's property, not even the one he'd transplanted the giant squid into. It wasn't a particularly large lake, but they would be able to use it to do the swimming portion of their workouts.

They'd discovered when they first ate Gillyweed after their transformation by the Queen that their metamorphmagus abilities allowed them to grow gills and webbed digits at will. As such, they had no time limits. So swimming was dear to all of them as a favorite form of exercise.

Hermione was also speculating about if they could get hairs from a centaur so they could try the same thing and see if they could get a centaur form like they had a fairy form. And when they saw Firenze she intended to ask.

Luna was more interested in giving doses of gillyweed to random fairies to see what it did for them.

They arrived at the side of the overgrown stock pond, Weasley car trailing along at a safe distance behind them, to see instead of the expected Firenze, Bane standing there beside several large bundles wrapped up in white fur, each the size of a couple bales of hay.

Hermione's question about borrowing hairs died in her throat when she saw the sober and serious expression on the centaur's face.

"What's wrong?" she felt genuinely puzzled.

Bane swished his tail uncomfortably, stamping a rear hoof. But he faced Harry with all the pomp and ceremony of one of guards of Buckingham Palace about to address the queen. "Harry Potter, it is not often the centaur tribes willingly part with any of the few treasures that fall into our hands. But our elders can no longer deny that what we hold in this case is no longer ours. Two years ago a vile creature went through this forest killing unicorns. This vile and blasphemous act was without peer in a generation of horrible deeds, but not without boon to the side of Light. When a unicorn falls we centaurs have loyally sought out those corpses to harvest as much as got left behind by their slayers to preserve the residual magics therein. These treasures are held in trust until the avenger of the unicorn comes forward, or until a dozen seasons pass. Word was only now brought to us that it was you, Harry, who slew the man Quirrel, who on Voldemort's orders killed these unicorns. Therefore all that is left of them now belongs to you."

And with that, Bane presented Harry with the horns, hides, hair, hooves and hearts of the ten unicorns the boy had avenged by slaying that incarnation of Voldemort his first year - one killed each month Riddle was at Hogwarts.

Hermione immediately squealed with glee. Seeing her friends looks, she saw fit to quickly explain, "You see, unicorn hair has powerful magical properties, but even vast wealth won't acquire much of it. There just isn't all that much for sale. This is an enormous treasure!"

"More than you know, Hermione," Luna correctly softly, gazing with a fond mixture of sadness and gladness at the collected treasures. "These are all willingly given - gifted to the man who avenged these

creatures by destroying the possessed man who slew them for his corrupt master. That is an ancient compact, one that's prevented mass unicorn deaths for all recorded history. Yes, slaying a unicorn can grant enormous treasures, but the one to kill the slayer gets even more valuable rewards. Thus, one plotting to kill a unicorn must not only accomplish a difficult task, but he must deal ever after with the consequences - that he is now more valuable dead than alive. It takes a heartless, desperate man to slay a unicorn because of that."

"But naturally, vulturewart didn't care and Quirrel wasn't aware that he was being sacrificed. He probably thought 'his lord' would somehow protect him." Harry rolled his eyes at the foolishness of minions.

Casting his glance towards Hermione, the boy continued, "And before you ask, there is no way to arrange for someone else to do the actual killings, then claim the rewards yourself."

Luna was nodding, stroking the soft, silky pelt closest her. "Unicorns are famous for sensing the hearts of those who would claim to ride or tame them - and accepting very few as pure enough to meet their standards. The same sense applies to those who would claim the rewards for avenging them, and if they had any guilt in the unicorn's death, no matter how well disguised, they get nothing save the mark as the next one to slay for another wanting to claim the rewards." She turned a piercing gaze up north toward Hogwarts. "So arranging their deaths is as bad as doing the actual killing. This way the wicked, greedy or selfish need not apply, as they will be refused."

"There is more to this than you know," Bane stepped forward, tossing his tail behind him. "Unicorns are an excellent judge of character. Only the pure of heart are permitted to touch them. If the hero to avenge them was pure enough to be accepted as a rider were the unicorns still alive, the rewards he is granted gain a whole new level of power."

All eyes turned toward Harry.

He smiled sheepishly. "Anyone got a unicorn we could test me on?"

"That would be unnecessary," Bane tossed his mane, stamping a hoof. "As the horns undergo a visible change when this occurs, and yours have done so. It was that which convinced our elders to part with them, despite receiving no official word of the deed that avenged them."

They looked and saw an emerald lightning bolt visible on the base of each horn.

Bane once more swished his tail, and they realized that he was actually pained to part with these. Seeing their understanding, he explained, "More powerful Light magic there is not than the treasures of an avenged unicorn whose avenger is truly pure. Nor can we deny them to him. But the talismans that could have been made of these are..." the centaur pawed a back hoof in agitation, swallowing his jealousy, "Are of such power it is difficult for my tribe to accept they shall not be ours. Farewell, Hero."

And with that, the centaur turned and bolted away.

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Thanks to a bit of malaclaw venom Albus had been experiencing a rash of magically bad luck for quite some while now. And even in his absence it went on. Only one of the instances of that ill-fortune manifesting had been for anti-elf wards to become fashionable and be installed all over the place right before The Prophet Disaster, when he'd sent around what was left of the Hogwarts staff of elves (all of them Harry hadn't already hired away) to go out illegally and steal the newspapers he didn't want people to see.

The vast majority of those elves sent out never came back, caught on the newly erected wards like flies on flypaper. But, unlike flies, the wards did not kill them, merely held them. House elves were considered far too valuable to exterminate in that way.

Still, the Department for the Disposal of Dangerous Magical Creatures did go around collecting them. That was one enforcement department that Albus had NOT thought to seize control of, and so

they actually went about their business, determining that all of those elves had been sent on illegal errands, directed to commit crimes, entering homes without permission to rob them (no matter the value of a newspaper was small, it was still robbery), and so declared all of them 'rogue elves' and terminated their previous employment contracts and put them up for sale.

Now House Elves are so mind-bogglingly valuable servants that they come up for sale only rarely. The purebloods who mostly owned them never gave them up lightly, and so the normal amount up for auction was quite small. So it was like being in the market for Rembrandts. If one becomes available it is snatched up quickly, but no one is prepared for two hundred of them to suddenly become available at once.

So the pureblood households acquired a handful, being poised to acquire one or two just on general principles, and given a bit of a lead in they could have acquired more. However, there was another large group of magical people who'd recently come into quite a lot of money. The witches and wizards who had recently moved to Godric's Hollow had sold houses and businesses to get there. But Harry had charged them practically nothing for their new shops and homes (as, after all, they'd cost him practically nothing and he wanted to encourage people to move in). That left most of those families with a tidy sum of cash many of them had been wondering what to do with. Vacations or costly luxury items had been considered, but when the newly available stock of House Elves got whispered about most of those wizarding families ditched those alternate plans and bought themselves an elf or two instead.

The former Hogwarts elves had never been happier.

Harry'd already used his House Elf labor force to transfer the belongings of people from their former homes to Godric's Hollow, so the migration could be accomplished more discretely. So even those who'd never been aware of the little creatures before had seen how useful they were, and had a hankering to acquire one. However, the market had been sewn up for centuries. They were so mind-bogglingly useful no one in control wanted the unwashed masses to have any, as it might give them ideas above their station.

After all, it wasn't a luxury to have something everyone enjoyed. The elites have always been careful to protect their privileges from the working class.

As part of that protection scam, to keep the supply of elves available small, and thus controllable, for years more and more of the surplus elf supply had been directed to Hogwarts. But even at that massive institution there was only so much work to do. Giving service to Big People was food to House Elves, they couldn't live without it; and as the supply of work got thinner and thinner stretched between them they gradually went on starvation rations.

Albus had been happy to invent more tasks for them. However, spying was work that did not satisfy, so it was for elves much like eating gravel. You can live through it, but it does nothing to nourish you.

It had been that situation that had allowed Harry to hire away half of the elf population of Hogwarts (the Founders artifacts had just enabled him to ask), in the process getting over two hundred elves for his personal service. Most of the remaining half had been caught by those anti-elf wards on that illegal errand, and all but a handful of those had now been bought by the new residents of Godric's Hollow.

Since Harry did not need all that much work done for him personally, he was glad to loan out most of his elves to the remaining households, granting the four hundred homes of that village a little over four hundred elves in total.

For the elves, this was a feeding frenzy.

Shoving them all together in Hogwarts had effectively been starving them, between all the elves doing the work there, and thus reducing the population as malnourished creatures do not propagate.

However, four hundred large houses, each with their own families and often enough blissfully messy children, and suddenly there was enough work for every elf to gorge themselves on. And, much like an abundant food supply encourages wild animals to breed, having

abundant work to perform meant they started breeding a bumper crop of new house elf babies.

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Down in the basement of Hogwarts, in the collapsed ruins of what was once a very secret and heavily warded lab, the bundimun was still creeping through dissolving the things that had managed to survive the phoenix' ire.

However it came upon three things that it could not devour, not including the melted glass and slagged ironwork. Two were chests containing horcruxes, pinned under a dozen tons of rock from the collapsed ceiling. The other was also a chest, this time containing the priceless philosopher's stone stolen from Nicholas Flamel by Dumbledore. The very stone he'd told the alchemist he'd destroyed.

Pinned under tons of rock like that, they were presently unretrievable by anyone. Only the bundimun even seemed to know they were there. However it did enjoy lapping up the Elixir of Life that had spilled out of countless broken bottles and pooled up in cavities under the rocks.

And as it drank, it grew.

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Author's Notes:

Well, response to my previous announcement absolutely blew my mind. I have never had that level of response to anything before. I apologize to those who sent me their email addresses, the fanfiction dot net bots appear to strip those out as well as URLs. So, though you sent them, I never got them.

I set up accounts at both mediaminer and ficwad (the first dot org, the second dot com) but received no reviews at the first and few at the second. And, well, it occurred to me that having no reviews is worse than reading no reviews. At least at this place I can read my responses on a computer at the local public library. Awkward at best, but better than nothing.

Still, this place gets more awkward all of the time for someone like me who surfs an old computer running old software - probably older than some of my readers at this point. So the search continues for a better way to do things, as the more time sucked up by navigating around awkward bits is less time I can spend writing and posting these stories you all enjoy so.

And I'd far rather be writing and posting stories.

If I absolutely run out of other options, I'll possibly set up a paypal account to ask for donations so I can get a slightly less ancient machine that can run better than Netscape 4.7 or a creaky, never actually approved for release beta version of Mozilla (from when it actually ran as Mozilla, back in those pre-Firefox days).

Chapter Sixty
by Lionheart

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The rest of September passed by in a blur for the Fey Trio, spent in a mix of going to classes, studying on the side, working on their projects, and causing headaches for Dumbledore for when (or if) he came back.

Luna caused that they should steal every statue, painting and suit of armor in the castle, all the while giggling the refrain: "that should have him pulling his beard out!"

Hermione caused that they should use Harry's dodo to 'puff' into the parts of the Headmaster's tower they had not been able to reach yet, especially the private storage rooms he used, and drained them dry, grabbing bales of phoenix feathers and barrels of tears as well as the rest of Dumbledore's impressive private library, along with every bed sheet or knick knack in his private quarters - including some priceless unicorn horn amulets that could be used to check food and things to detect poisons.

She may have done a bit of giggling herself over the books thus acquired.

Harry's private project was to break the web of information wards around the school. He couldn't break them all, that would take ages, but he could and did snap select pieces of them in such a way as to render the rest useless.

Basically, if he could not stop them from collecting information (which he couldn't, those parts were too vast), and couldn't stop them from reporting what they found (which, to be quite frank, were not only vast but outclassed his knowledge of wards by a wide margin - Dumbledore was an information specialist who had obsessively refined these until they were at a very high level) he could destroy the reservoir which sorted and stored this information for the headmaster's retrieval. So essentially, if he didn't hear a warning right away as it happened, he would not hear it at all.

This had the salutary effect of erasing all past messages the Headmaster had not yet listened to that had been piling up during this moment of crisis, destroying a considerable store of information. But it also meant his wards would not be recording anything new until he came back and repaired them.

It really doesn't matter how good you are at magical surveillance, or how many camera or microphone equivalents you've got placed about, if you're not there to check in on them and they have no way to record information.

He also started another basilisk to replace Blinky and disguised as the Colonel approached a few squibs and got them to start a KFC in Hogsmead.

That would boil Dumbledore's bottom, he felt sure. Also, more than that, McGonagall had, in an effort to spare what poor, overworked House Elves remained to the school, put fried chicken back on the menu.

They had it three times a week at school, now. Albus would flip.

The group also made several stops by the long term spell damaged ward of St. Mungo's, because Frank and Alice were far from the only ones ever held there for over-exposure to the Cruciatus. That had been one of the Dung Eater's favorite spells, and there were a couple of hundred who had survived it but had their minds broken by the attack. Some of those had since passed on, but many remained, and rebuilding their minds with loyalty imprints like he'd used on Lockhart and the Longbottoms gave him a few more people he could rely on each visit. And he desperately needed trustworthy people to help run his towns - especially since both of his main opponents, Dumbledore and Riddle, used spies, informants and traitors as a matter of course.

The skills of these people he was recovering were all over the map, but they could be made to accept training, just like Lockhart had been; and Harry was getting not a few aurors and other skilled professionals out of this little act of kindness. And a solid core of

dedicated individuals was exactly what was required to start many of his town offices off on the right foot.

There were one or two worrisome little bumps during the rest of that month. Very few werewolves came forward to accept the portkey collar. Not even Remus. Also, the surviving acromantulas driven out of the Forbidden Forest just seemed to have disappeared. Neither they, nor the werewolves of the hidden village, turned up anywhere - which left all of the kids uneasy, since, as Harry put it, "They all have to be somewhere and eating something."

But, while troubling, the children were already overextended, so there was very little they could do about it, and sweeps by Hedwig turned up no sign of the wayward monsters.

Strangely, though their major problems seem to have retreated, or even been defeated, a host of minor ones cropped up in their wake that were no less dangerous or annoying.

Harry's first warning of this was on one of those infrequent occasions when he actually woke up in his bed in the boy's dorms (he stayed there only rarely due to the fact that now he had other places to be - and Ron's snores could wake the dead) to discover Ginny Weasley leaning over him, about to give him a kiss.

His scream of shock and surprise had woken the entire dorm.

Granted, he had enough threats to be worried about to be concerned over having something looming over him as he woke, but still that reaction led to a situation almost worse than most of the fights he'd been in, as the entire Gryffindor dormitory learned about Ginny sneaking into his bed attempting to claim a kiss, and started teasing him about it, soon to be followed by most of the school.

It was strange to be fighting for ones life almost daily and find your worst nightmare being a bunch of kids making fun of you. But there it was, the actual threats to his life hadn't been that bad, but the teasing was getting miserable. Worse yet, it was giving other girls ideas!

He'd been down to the Hospital Wing with a vial of phoenix tears to cure Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson of their lingering injuries, because they weren't likely to make a full recovery under Poppy's treatment and he cared for them as teammates. But, on being cured, both girls had immediately surged up off their beds and chased him around, trying to kiss him!

This was intolerable! Worse, yet, they could make the same claims about being saved by him, so a kiss could form a binding engagement.

Technically speaking, since saving the Stone and slaying the basilisk were both heroic deeds that saved the lives of everyone in the castle, if Harry were to kiss any unpromised maiden in Hogwarts he could marry them. His defeat of Voldemort could even count as saving every maiden in the world!

And frankly that idea scared him.

He didn't care to drown in a sea of women any more than he already was. Hermione and Luna had been enough for him. He'd resisted Susan but caved in under her aunt's pressure, and she'd just sort of brought Hannah along before he'd known how to do anything about it.

Ok, he really enjoyed having Hermione and Luna about. They were among the most competent witches he'd ever heard of at their ages. They were a true resource and he was glad to have them, and Hannah and Susan were working their little bottoms off to catch up to them. But he was certain very few of the girls he knew had either their gifts of genius or work ethic.

Objectively, right now he was at war. There was very little time for frivolity, and most of what girls were interested in struck him as frivolous. Very few of the female Death Eaters had been worth anything, with Bellatrix being the notable exception.

If they couldn't contribute in a useful fashion, he had no time for them at present. He couldn't afford to be burdened down with dependents, those who consumed more resources than they provided. His circumstances were just too dangerous for that.

On an emotional level, as opposed to the practical, fangirls scared him. They all had these ideals built up of what he ought to be based on nothing more than their own fantasies and little girl romantic daydreams, and frankly he was convinced not only that the real him wouldn't match their expectations, but that he'd get the blame for not being all they imagined.

He certainly didn't want to be stuck with them after they discovered that.

He was a real boy, not a dream. He had flaws and weaknesses and bad habits, none of which would match the idealized fantasies built up about him, and all those girls out there who were determined to marry their dream could only be disappointed in him. And that disappointment could easily turn to hate.

It would be a nightmare to marry a fangirl who then turned hateful for you not living up to idealized expectations that no one alive COULD live up to!

Besides, all this romantic stuff... well, Harry had not been through puberty yet, and Tom Riddle had sacrificed his sex organs for power. Neither set of memories was set up all that well to do ought but tease, and that not well.

However his girls felt this situation was hilariously funny. Hermione and Luna had several giggles over Ginny trying to ambush Harry (often in the nude, and frequently in his bed) trying to steal her kiss. Susan and Hannah puzzled over that, but were working so hard to catch up to the others of the trio they hadn't had time to say anything.

Ron was a seething jealousy machine over the whole thing, of course - which it really bugged Harry that Ron still had that much power to annoy him.

Although Ron did not react well to Harry's offer that if he wanted his own fangirls so bad he was certainly welcome to have Ginny.

Actually, it was as though a dam had burst, in that all these little things they had been ignoring up til now, safely ensconced in dealing with crises, were now bubbling to the surface and demanding the attention they'd previously been denied.

Not the least of these was the Assistant Professorships Myrtle awarded to them. In the wake of the Ghostbuster attack Myrtle had become something of a heroine to the entire ghost population of Hogwarts, going right on holding classes even while ghostbusters were in the castle hunting them.

She had with that act become something of a legend in the spirit community.

Hermione never stopped gloating over Binns having been destroyed early on during that raid. As a non-moving target, bound to the chair he'd died in, it hadn't taken more than a second for Luna to slide a trap under him, and that was the end of one boring professor.

Actually, with no paintings, statues or suits of armor about, the only spies left of Dumbledore's impressive network aside from the school staff and prefects (who now could not report in as they usually did, due to the lack of paintings) were the ghosts - and Harry made copies of that book on exorcism and began to leave them about the school, particularly in the common rooms.

Slytherin students started it, exorcising Nearly Headless Nick, but Gryffindor was quick to respond by getting rid of the Bloody Baron. Soon ghosts were vanishing right and left, either racing off to parts unknown or getting sent on to their rewards. Even Ravenclaw got in on the act purely for spell practice, while Hufflepuffs began plotting their own Ghostbuster franchise.

The ghost population of Britain dropped by at least half. Hogwarts was left practically empty of spooks. Soon Myrtle was essentially the only ghost left in the formerly haunted castle willing to show her face, and she remained mostly because no one wanted to miss her classes.

They were showing Braveheart this week.

One of the surprising things going on was how excited the students were over their History of Magic classes. The Ravenclaws averaged about four feet of parchment on the subject, drawing conclusions like: obviously the Ring-Wraiths were the origin of the Dementors, and High Elves and Wood Elves leaving to go to their own hidden, sheltered islands was how the magical world got stuck with only their miserable distant relation: House Elves. And Thulsa Doom now had his own slot in the official history of dark lords, while people tried to figure out what place he had in Slytherin's ancestry.

That wasn't the only odd thing going on.

Dwarves actually existed in Magical Britain, Harry knew from second year when he'd had the unpleasant experience of having been humiliated by one of the ones Lockhart had delivering singing Valentines around the castle. Tolkein had even been right about most of the race's traits, only Ravenclaws had pegged the current, miserable existence of those creatures as being as it was only because they'd been driven out of their mountain halls.

Humans weren't the only race goblins had made war on. And working in conjunction with evil wizards the goblins had broken the backs of the dwarven clans, before immediately falling out and waging war with each other over the plunder thus achieved.

Goblins bred so fast and were so foul-tempered that if it weren't for the fact that they fought among themselves and wiped each other out semi-regularly, they'd have destroyed every other race on the planet.

Actually, those history reports made a surprising amount of sense. If one didn't know beforehand that story was all produced by a fiction writer, one could see how the world came about the way those Ravenclaws described it.

And that was scary on its own.

One particularly well-read student even pointed out a little known fact - that dragons, as a species, were once far more intelligent, and thus dangerous, than they were today. Wizards had managed to transform them into dumb brutes, but only after generations of breeding.

Wizards at dragon preserves still made sure to dose all newly-hatched drakes with intelligence-dampening potions as part of their first food out of their eggs.

And, Harry wondered just how potent those potions were, because wizards did eat dragon meat. The beasts were regularly slaughtered for their hides, also for dragon heartstrings for wand cores, and something had to be done with the flesh, so it generally got sold for food.

Dragon meat was an expensive staple to the diet of rich, upper class wizards like purebloods, and a 'special occasion' treat for practically all other magic folk, so if the effects of those potions survived ingestion by the dragon to get passed on to the eater of that dragon's flesh... well, that could explain so much about wizarding behavior!

They might be morons, in part, because they ate flesh treated with potions to make the ingester a moron. That made a scary amount of sense!

Then again, those facts might have nothing to do with each other. The idiocy could just be cultural. He saw plenty of evidence of that, as well.

The castle began to feel downright empty without the specters, magical paintings and moving suits of armor. Frankly, it was a touch spooky for the students to be the only moving things in those vast, drafty halls.

Strange for it to feel creepy WITHOUT the ghosts, but there it was. It did.

Also, those papers McGonagall had signed to get rid of the 'Ghostbusters', well... they didn't have anything to do with those students getting paid for their work at a made-up company.

No, they were another kettle of fish entirely.

As Deputy Headmistress she had a lot of power; only since Albus had left the actual day-to-day running of the castle to her so he could

pursue other interests in the Geezergamot and whatever, she had a great deal more. He'd never released hiring decisions to her, of course, but what he had let her do was almost worse.

McGonagall was in charge of the day to day running of the castle. Of necessity that required her to hold a significant chunk of authorization to handle financial dealings and other sorts of decision making powers.

She was, in short, everything BUT the Headmaster in directing the school. And if he didn't choose to countermand her edicts within a certain period they held as much force as though he'd declared them himself. Since he was currently unavailable to countermand those orders, he was going to be stuck with whatever she did when or if he ever came back.

The first set had very simply expelled Draco, Crabbe and Goyle, fired Snape and Filch, and released Binns from his post (although that last was moot, as the ghost had already been exorcised, but it did help to speed the wheels of bureaucracy towards his replacement just to acknowledge him gone).

Minerva could not hire their replacements, but it was good to have those problems dealt with.

The next set had been slightly sneakier, proclaiming long lists of valuable Hogwarts artifacts lost and promising a reward to the finders. Should they be found and a fitting reward not issued within a certain period of time, ownership of those treasures would revert to their discoverers.

Sitting neatly in the Headmaster's inbox, notarized and dated as to when received, was a note explaining that Harry had found the Sorting Hat sitting on the head of a scarecrow in a farmer's field while on one of his daily runs, and offering to return it for the reward offered.

The period of time left to act on this if Hogwarts wanted their hat back was rapidly diminishing, nor did they expect Dumbledore home soon.

Harry didn't even particularly WANT the hat, it was just another thing to use to screw Dumbledore. After all, the man loved his image, but no headmaster in history had even done so grievous a thing to that school as lose the Sorting Hat. So history ought to remember him poorly even if he somehow managed to escape his current sets of troubles.

Actually, one of the very most important of the slips McGonagall signed was a release allowing the development of a satellite school in Godric's Hollow.

Now, to Harry a school was a school. The only difference worth mentioning was the quality of the education they offered. However, he had enough of Tom Riddle's pureblood scheming to know that to the Ministry and magical public at large, it was tradition and history that was more important. The aura of respectability of an institution was valued more highly than its quality among the elite sectors of magical society.

So, since Harry'd been planning for the renovation of Godric's Hollow even before they went and played Ghostbusters at school, having McGonagall sign forms that allowed the formation of a small school to be established there as an annex of Hogwarts meant it was legally and socially a part of Hogwarts and therefore shared the same aura of mystique and respectability. Then, at the same time, she'd also signed release forms making it a self-governing entity, independent of Hogwarts control.

It was an easy way to steal a bit of quick respectability for his new school. And it would force the Ministry to consider graduates from there almost the same as those out of Hogwarts, should things ever progress to where his towns and the rest of the magical world were dealing peaceably with each other. But he didn't expect that to happen until after the fighting was over.

The trick now would be to get McGonagall to sign more forms for his other towns so their schools could have the same. He could do it from the one he already had, but better if he could get McGonagall to do it again. Right now the as yet unnamed school at Godric's Hollow was one step removed from being 'as good as' Hogwarts. If he had other

schools established from there that would make his other towns one step further away, making them two steps removed from Hogwarts, and that would matter to the ego-obsessed morons in the Ministry when it came time for his graduates to apply for jobs.

To Harry's mind, every one of his villages had to be self-sufficient to the maximum degree possible. If he built them all inter-connected and relying on each other for basic services, then that would make it possible for an enemy to target a key town and take it out, leaving all others crippled.

He couldn't afford that weakness, so each had to see to its own needs as much as possible, seeing to its own food, education, services, and so on.

It just wasn't safe to do otherwise.

Another thing none of them had expected was the side effect of having many clans of dwarves each produce a village for him led somehow to competitions between dwarven clans for best job done, most ingenious defenses, etc.

They had a great fortress-city pattern to work off of; after all, Palmanova was built exactly as an enclave to defend against all odds. And that dwarven pride had kicked in, too, so the clans were working so hard at this they were rediscovering many of their lost arts, and actually tearing down previous work to restore old buildings to a higher standard. So the quality being done by these formerly dispossessed workers on his projects was skyrocketing.

But that ancient dwarven pride was the kicker. Dwarves held ancient grudges with the same ease and frequency as they did beards, and they all expected Harry, as their employer, to do the judging between them - and whichever way he picked, he'd likely just satisfy one clan while making the other five eternal enemies over the insult of not proclaiming their work the best.

Luna calmly supplied the resolution to this problem by having Harry order the clans to appoint judges. They each would have two votes: one to cast for his own clan's work (because you couldn't ask them

not to) but the second could only be cast in favor of some other clan's efforts.

Having each clan cast a vote in favor of themselves, those votes would even out and essentially mean nothing aside from soothing fiery dwarven tempers. It would be the secondary votes that decided each issue.

She then selected categories, based on the history of each clan about what each had been best about doing, so each could win at something. Even if they didn't, they'd have the other clan's judges to blame, not Harry. But hopefully they'd all work it out to mutual satisfaction.

Dwarves were actually fairly good about not offending other dwarves.

To further isolate himself from blame, Harry offered prizes of a hundred tons of muggle scrap metal to each winner in every department. That made him the prize giver, someone to dwarven minds who was actually supposed to stay out of judging and therefore NOT the one to blame if any judging went sour. But it served to redouble the dwarves' efforts - and frankly, Harry was determined to deliver a hundred and ten tons of metal in each case, and have them be the ones to pick out what they wanted from the scrap yards, lest he be accused of being even an ounce short on payment.

Dealing with dwarven pride and prestige was always a tricky situation.

However, speaking of prestige, Luna knew of a ritual to perform under the harvest moon at fall equinox to cause a damaged stone or metal object to repair itself. Harry, who hadn't been able to wear the Founder's artifacts since their gems had gone missing, dissolved during that first fire protection ritual they'd undergone, used it on those priceless artifacts and had those jewels regrown to their original size and luster.

So once more he was able to parade around wearing the Founder's artifacts.

Luna had always said the spirit of those stones remained in those objects, and that ritual proved her right. So Harry and all of his girls were doing their homework in Ravenclaw tower with Luna (and making free with the Ravenclaw tower library). And, since he was wearing the Diadem of Ravenclaw, no one had the heart to refuse him.

Besides, it kept him safe from Ginny and her antics.

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Author's Notes:

One or two more chapters like this one to address some dangling loose ends before we can get to the massive explosion of enemy activity. Also, this is a rare opportunity to deal with non-crisis plot movements, stuff that doesn't concern their survival one way or the other - like interacting with the Weasleys.

Chapter Sixty-One
by Lionheart

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Show of hands. Has anyone here ever heard the phrase 'calm before the storm?'

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Walking down the hallway with her arms full of books after morning classes on her way to lunch, Hermione told Susan and Hannah as they joined her, "Trelawney is beginning to scare me."

"Oh?" the Hufflepuffs inquired curiously, as girls are wont to do when scenting good gossip.

"Yes." The bookworm nodded. "Just today she asked, demanded really, books of published furniture forms from famous cabinet makers such as Thomas Sheraton, Thomas Chippendale and George Hepplewhite, compendiums of their designs and those of other cabinet makers, the pre-mass-production artisan-only stuff. I think she might be getting a trifle obsessed. I don't think she's going to stop until the furniture she gives Harry would be fit for royal houses at their most decadent."

"But you got her the books?" Susan asked.

"Of course!" Hermione smiled. "I rather like the look of furniture from that era, and am hoping for some samples myself."

The Gryffindor and two Hufflepuffs watched as Luna crossed their path, so intent she didn't notice them.

They were all a little worried about her.

It was Luna's Gift to know needful things, to know what's needed. She might not know how to get it, or why it's required, but she knew what was required, and for the past twenty days, even while things had been at their busiest back when they'd been fighting Dumbledore

full time, she had been working her little tail off in what time could be spared from group activities to pursue measures for enhancing plants.

First thing she'd stolen Harry's notes on his Potion of Plant Protection, converted over from the Pot version the Bones family would be producing, and after making a copy for herself gave it over to the Weasley Twins with instructions for seeing what they could do with that and Re'em blood.

Outside Hogwarts she'd hired an agent to track down for her one of the rare few potion masters able to mix one of the little known wonders of their art: the precious Essence of Evergreen. A rare elixir that protected a plant against colder climates than it might be accustomed to.

The brew was considered frivolous even among wizards. Highly volatile during mixing, it was both rare and expensive, so much so that it rarely if ever got used, so was one of the harder magical wonders to obtain. After all, even among wizards very few were of a mind to spend more gold to protect one plant than it would take to buy an entire field full of greenhouses.

Luna had also written, through her Great Aunt Dorothy, to Glinda the Good Witch of Oz pleading for potion recipes for enhancing plants and gotten back two: One for converting Elixir of Life into a brew that could provide a plant with resistance to rot and corrosion of all types, and another using phoenix tears at its base that provided a plant immunity to poison and diseases.

Luckily the trio had both rare and precious ingredients on hand.

Luna was not the only witch with fairy gifts, and Glinda had her own version: knowing not just what was required, but what was possible. It was a better gift than Luna's own, but she wasn't jealous.

Glinda had also sent back one of the magical devices stolen by Alice from the British Department of Mysteries, a silver watering can studded with rubies that caused trees to continually fruit and blossom all year round.

Luna had already been searching through the treasures they'd obtained from looting the Hogwarts basement vaults and storerooms, and had come up with another patent application, this one by Harry's grandparents, for a ribbon to be tied around a tree trunk or plant stem that would enchant the whole for protection against inclement weather such as hailstorms or early frosts.

Giving that to Harry she'd ordered him to put on Ravenclaw's Diadem to make a conversion process into a potion straight away.

Then she'd also ordered an expensive Draught of Draughts, a potion that let you combine lots of potions into a single jigger without conflicting, invented by a hypochondriac wizard so he could take all of his medicines in a single swallow without blowing his intestines apart or leaking strange gasses.

The others in their group did not know the reasons for Luna's mania, but went along with it anyway.

Alerted by this little obsession, Harry had dipped into Riddle's studies for a tidbit he'd come across and ordered some very expensive old Greek books, authored by the court scribe of Alcinous, and detailing how his marvelous and sublime orchard had been created.

Even muggles had heard about that place. It was mentioned in the Odyssey: "Therein grow trees, tall and luxuriant, pears and pomegranates and apple-trees with their bright fruit, and sweet figs, and luxuriant olives. Of these the fruit perishes not nor fails in winter or in summer, but lasts throughout the year."

The boy settled down to study and master these enchantments. If Luna wanted plant enhancements, Harry would back her not even knowing why.

After this, however, he'd make a copy of these books and give it to Neville for his birthday. No reason not to make the boy happy.

Although when he'd learned his parents were awake, the boy had all but dropped out of school for two weeks to spend time with them, so

he was already practically delirious with joy, floating around the castle on a cloud.

Neville still spent every weekend and most evenings with them. In fact they rarely saw him at mealtimes, as he took both breakfast and dinner at home.

The smile he had on would light up a dim corridor, however.

Hermione for her part had, with Harry's permission, begun to study the old Potter family grimoires dealing with plants and growing things. Such was her trust in Luna that she began to prepare a recipe she'd found there in spite of it having all of the drawbacks of Essence of Evergreen, namely that it was so difficult and expensive to brew that no plant one could use it on would be worth the price, but that enabled one to live on any soil.

She couldn't imagine it being worth it. The ingredients alone cost half of what had been in Harry's trust vault, which was a ridiculous sum for a potion. But they went ahead and did it all the same.

She could understand the reason IF they could've used something like this on Trelawney. But most of these potions had to be applied to a seed. They were useless on a plant that had already germinated. So Hermione truly couldn't understand the point, but went ahead trusting Luna anyway.

Luckily she was far above her classmate's ability, above even where her year should be if they didn't have Snape as a teacher, as was proven when she'd brewed polyjuice last year, or she'd not have had the ability for this one, even with all of Harry's marvelous potion brewing tools.

Still, she wondered if they all weren't being a little obsessive about this. It would be so much simpler, and cheaper, to buy truckloads of dragon dung!

The dragon dung would have done a better job, too.

Hermione sighed when Harry didn't come to the dinning table. She'd have to seek him out after lunch. They had an appointment together to use the last of the remaining current charge in the Goblet of Fire in some rituals to bind Harry's three dragons to their service.

Come to think of it, he was probably off buying dragons for Susan and Hannah.

And, true enough, he came back having found nine more dragons hatched from the same clutches as their current Antipodean Opaleye, Chinese Fireball, and Swedish Short-Snout. Three from each clutch.

It was six more than they needed, but none of them saw that as a problem.

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As had been previously stated, one of the odd things about going back to a semi-normal environment where they weren't dealing with crises all of the time were having to deal with all of the non-crisis issues that had been piling up in the background as they'd dealt with war measures.

One of those un-dealt-with issues was Ginny. But as the first Hogsmead trip arrived and he shoved himself into their company, they got reminded another was Ron. If they wanted to pretend normalcy and avoid tedious explanations and possibly detentions, they couldn't just hex him or drive him off.

But he was a headache all the same.

After ruining their lunch, Ron had followed them as they explored around town. They were going through a second-hand shop in Hogsmead, trying to pretend everything was normal, when Hermione stopped to exclaim, "That may be the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen."

"What is it?" Ron shoved himself forward, still dropped crumbs off the front of his robes from a bag of crisps he'd made Harry pay for.

"Have a look," Harry waved toward the object in question. He and Hermione stood aside so the dullard could see.

"An obsidian cauldron? What's so odd about that?" Ron asked, face scrunched up in confusion.

Harry sighed, rolling his eyes. "Ron, what are cauldrons used for?"

"Making potions, Harry. Everyone knows that. Did nearly getting kissed to death cause you to forget things?" The redhead taunted.

"I see subtlety is lost on you," Harry sneered, insulted at being called an idiot by an idiot, then caught himself and sighed. "Ron, to make a potion requires heat, right?"

"Yeah, so what?" the redhead asked dully.

While Hermione smirked over not having to be the one to explain things for a change, Harry picked up the heavy cauldron and tapped the black material. "So? Obsidian is a rock. Rock isn't like metal. Metal conducts heat, but rock RESISTS heat! So, you're trying to cook something, but this won't heat easily or quickly or evenly. So any potion you made in this would be spoiled because no matter what you did, the heat would ALWAYS be wrong!! Actually, this is worse than just about any other rock - this is Volcanic Glass!! You'd need a BLAST FURNACE to heat this thing up at all quickly!! Anything hot enough to get this pot even slightly warm would incinerate whatever ingredients you put inside it! You couldn't even approach to stir it. I'm sure whatever stupid idiot ordered this thing made found it USELESS!"

Seeing Ron's dumbfounded look, Hermione decided to chip in. "Ronald, I could take you up to Hogwarts right this minute, and we could go over the Potions section of the library book by book, and you'd never find one recipe that could use something like this. It would be like... well, like having a wand that weighed fifty tons and was as long and wide as a quidditch pitch. Even if you could lift it, you could never wave it around or carry it indoors with you."

Nothing annoyed Hermione so much as a goofy idiot thinking he was brilliant. Ron got a 'Ha! Caught You!' grin on his face and said, "Oh yeah? I bet if you shrunk it, a wand like that would be pretty powerful!"

In response, she merely drew her wand and shrank his. Lofting an eyebrow eloquently, she said, "Go on. Use it."

Taking his now-matchstick-sized wand gingerly between two fingers, Ron tried to cast a spell at her. There came a flash of light and he jerked as if burned. In seconds the boy was jumping around, waving his fingers, trying to get the sparks to go out and stop burning him. His tiny matchstick wand had been flung off who knows where in his initial reaction.

"Putting spells on wands is generally a very bad idea," she told him primly as the boy started to suck on the ends of his sore fingers. "Wand crafters know the only few exceptions, and those just fine tune them. Anyway, size has nothing to do with a wand's potency. If anything, as it serves as a conduit for your energy, it would take MORE of your magic to cast the same level of spell. Like drinking soda out of a straw that was two miles long! The soda can is your energy. You don't get any more to drink, there is only so much in the can, it only takes more time and effort to get it. Being large would only make it inefficient. Wands are the size they are for a reason!"

"But bigger is always better, right?" the dullard insisted.

Hermione exasperatedly rolled her eyes. "Not always. In some cases, like this one, it would be like putting on pants a hundred sizes too large for you and expecting that to make you taller! If anything, the extra material would only drag, slow you down, and make you look ridiculous!

"As with pants," Harry smirked. "Having a proper fit is what's important with a wand. Just like proper heat is important for a cauldron."

"So why did someone make that thing?" Ron thrust a still stinging finger accusingly at the obsidian cauldron, sitting back on its shelf where Harry had returned it.

"They were stupid?" Harry and Hermione both had a small laugh, before she started to lecture again. "Obsidian has its uses, but a cauldron isn't one of them - any more than you'd want an obsidian pair of pants!"

"The things you want pants for, bending and folding and flexing, are all things obsidian is worst at," Harry added his bit helpfully. "Just like it doesn't suit making potions."

"So it can't be used for anything?" Ron asked around the fingers he was still sucking the ends on.

Harry shrugged. "I can think of plenty of uses: a chamber pot, washbasin, something to store loose change in... just nothing involving potions."

"It would be a decent material if you wanted to hold melted metal," the bushy haired girl interjected. "But at anything less than those temperatures, it has no practical use - And it's the wrong shape for holding metal. You want those to be tall and narrow so fewer sparks escape. This is low and wide. So, no. I have to agree with Harry. This has no practical use. Maybe you could stick it on your mantelpiece and fill it with colored marbles as a conversation piece. But aside from a curio, it has no practical value."

"Yeah," Harry was nodding. "Like those little statues of elephants. This isn't a cauldron. It is a piece of art that looks like a cauldron."

"Right you are, dearies," the shopkeeper mysteriously appeared behind them. "That's not a cauldron. It was never meant to be a cauldron. Instead, it was a cauldron holder, used to keep volatile or experimental potions from eating away at your desk. Fire won't scar it, and acids won't dissolve it."

"But explosions would shatter it, and fill the air with razor edged pieces of glass," Hermione filled in, somewhat horrified.

"Well, there is a reason it is in a second hand shop, dearie," the owner turned away to go back about her business, seeing there would be no sale on that.

Harry and Hermione both met glances. "People try new things. Sometimes those don't work." Harry shrugged.

Ron bought the cauldron.

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The next morning the Creevey brothers came to Harry with a completed yearbook, pictures of all of the current students, clubs, and so on. It was an amazing job given that they'd spent less than a month compiling it, and half the emergencies going on would've halted a less-motivated project team.

He signed their copies without argument, even bought one himself, and some as gifts to other students.

Instantly after doing so, however, the boy popped up to do some networking, making the rounds of the entire school introducing himself and shaking hands, asking each and every person, whether teacher or student, to sign his yearbook - and offering to sign theirs in turn if they had one.

The Creevey brothers sold out in the first few minutes and raced off to the owlry with an order to get more printed.

After they were gone Hermione giggled aside to Luna, "So twelve year old Ginny is wandering naked around the tower trying to steal a kiss (or a shag) from Harry and no one is taking pictures to embarrass her down the road? Creevey's slipping."

"Don't worry," Luna informed her softly. "I've got it covered."

The movie camera from their History of Magic class ran passed on its tripod.

After a pause, from across the breakfast table Susan shook her head. "This is sadly an improvement from the Ginny of last year who just sat there and sighed and wondered why Harry wasn't stalking her yet."

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"Uh, girls? We have a problem," Harry admitted sheepishly as they got out of final classes for the day and began walking over the lawn out toward the lake - Dumbledore had never gotten around to announcing new restrictions yet, seeing as how he'd been massively occupied with making complaints to the American Ministry over their lack of concern over the 'Ghostbuster' disaster in New York, and afterwards had been tied up in other emergencies. Seeing four faces turn to him in trusting incomprehension, the boy elaborated. "We're running out of malaclaw venom."

"Why does that matter?" Hannah piped up.

"Because we've been using it to dose the Headmaster," Hermione answered the question, feeling rather glum about the news. "We started out as three little ants attacking a lion - which the ants can do provided the lion is drugged out of its gourd and essentially a helpless target. But even so it takes a long time, and the moment he gets up he could still crush us."

"Malaclaw venom made every potential random event go against him," Luna supplied. "Which did far more to hurt him than our efforts alone could ever have supplied."

"To give you a sense of the scale, Dumbledore had full control over an entire magical country, and arguably, through his command of the ICW, more than one. But we started out just three third year students with no particular power or resources," Hermione instructed. "Picture three African tribesmen wielding spears going up against the entire might of the Nazi empire at its height and you will get the idea."

"The fight was so uneven it might as well have been a joke," Luna agreed.

Harry carried on, "In my first year the Headmaster gave me back a family heirloom he'd stolen, only it was soaked in malaclaw venom to give me bad luck every time I used it. This year, Hermione turned the tables on him by dipping her copy of that cloak into his tea, and he foolishly drank it."

"Since that time, nothing has gone right for him, and we've been able to kick him while he was down," Luna caroled, skipping a step or two in joy.

Hermione was more sober as she added, "And it turns out, nothing less could have saved our lives. Every time we hit the Headmaster, it turns out he has powers and reserves of strength we'd never dreamed of. He's shrugged off blows that would've destroyed any other man. But he just takes them on the chin and goes right on with what he was doing. It's ridiculous!"

Harry nodded. "Voldemort would've fallen a dozen times under the blows we've dealt our Headmaster. There really seems to have been no end to his power, wealth, influence or authority, and he schemes at least a dozen moves ahead of his opponents. Really, it's as if he owns the entire game!"

"It's like we've only been stabbing him with pins," Hermione agreed, brushing hair back out of her face. "No matter how vital a strike we think it is, he just takes it and keeps going on. Anyway, we have a still set up, wringing all of the malaclaw venom we can through repeated washings of each cloak, followed by distilling the venom out of the water."

"This idea was based on Hermione's successful dosing of Dumbledore by dipping her cloak in his tea," Harry provided as an informational aside, before sighing, "But the cloaks are running out. This is not a bad thing, it just means we need a new source of malaclaw venom. Unfortunately Dumbledore got a step ahead of us, and has been buying up and destroying the world supply."

Luna froze for a moment in fear, then shivered. "Dumbledore is still a threat. He's survived everything we've done to him so far. I don't believe he is entirely out of contingency plans yet. I can't believe it,

not after what we've seen out of his Machiavellian plans already. He's hatched more twisted plots than my Uncle Lucius. No, fighting against him is still a needful thing."

"How did you get Dumbledore to take it?" Susan asked. "More tea?"

"No," Harry smiled.

Luna turned brightly to the newcomers. "You mean during that summary of our struggle nobody mentioned Confounding Snape to believe that malaclaw venom was an integral part of the ritual to raise Dumbledore from the dead? How odd. I was sure we'd covered that."

Hermione giggled. "Yes, every time he got raised he got a whole new dose of malaclaw venom. The only trouble is Dumbledore has been getting destroyed so often we go through a lot of doses."

Harry nodded soberly. "And it's doubly important if we destroyed his last body. Because a whole new body won't have any lingering traces of the last dose in its system, starting off fresh instead."

Hermione grew grim. "And without him suffering bad luck it would be a more fair fight; and a fair fight between three natives with spears and the entire Nazi empire at its height... well, the outcome would not be in question."

"Dumbledore's empire has suffered some losses and setbacks, nor are we quite as helpless as we were starting out," Luna amended. "But even if you call us five western gunslingers - infinitely more powerful than three natives with spears, and say our enemy has been subjected to some bombing at his capital. The outcome would still not be in doubt."

Hannah and Susan looked at each other. "So... that means we've got to keep up the bombing?"

"Right," Hermione stated decisively. "And that means more malaclaw venom, because realistically what we could do to him without that is limited. He has so many resources to draw on, and so much

experience and authority, that if he were actually able to resist our strikes we'd be totally helpless."

"How so?" Susan asked.

Harry grimaced. "Well, for one he still has by far the majority of the aurors under his direct control. Your aunt is trying to fix that, but due to the power of his spells she can only reclaim a few each day. So if he were to come back right now and learn who was striking against him (and without bad luck to distract him, I fear it would not be long before he identified us - he is an information specialist, after all), we'd be facing nearly the entire strength of the auror corps hunting us down. I don't want to face that."

Hermione sighed. "But that's only ONE of the many things we KNOW he could throw against us on almost no notice! And the resources we are building, like the towns, are not ready to be used in combat yet."

"So really," Luna concluded. "Our strategy depends upon him not being able to resist us, and for that we simply must have more malaclaw venom."

"Couldn't we just buy more, like in another country?" Susan asked.

Harry shook his head. "No. Dumbledore's already bought up everything he or his agents could beg, borrow or steal. He knows this bad luck hurts him just as well as we do, and was doing his best to stop it by cutting it off at the source. Malaclaws only appear in the UK, so cutting off all the sources here and then buying up what was available on the world market has dried it all up. And it's not like there's that big a market for it, so no great stockpiles were out there. Its prime use was as the active ingredient in Liquid Luck - the rest of that potion is only there to reverse the luck it gives from bad to good. But since not many people even CAN brew that..."

"Can't you just buy a malaclaw?" Hannah inquired innocently.

The Fairy Trio stared at each other.

"I'll get right on it," Harry declared, right before vanishing. Fortunately for them, and unluckily for Dumbledore, Harry managed to obtain a few live malaclaws to milk for venom, putting them on his private preserve in one of the fish ponds - using zombies as his work force to milk them, as he didn't want to get anywhere close to the claws of a critter that could inject it into him.

The trouble now was introducing the stuff should Dumbledore came back and Snape not be there to do it for them.

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Author Notes:

Truly, Dumbledore's luck has been so bad that almost everything they've done has been free hits on him. It would be an entirely different equation if he'd been able to fight back. If he'd been able to hit THEM with anywhere near the facility they hit HIM, there wouldn't be anything left of them by now.

Chapter Sixty-Two
by Lionheart

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Topping the list of recent events, Sirius came back to England, name newly cleared by an embarrassed British Ministry, and started to help them with sundry tasks both personal and private. For the latter he had taken over at first helping, and then directing the Weasley Twins in their mock attacks on the newly arrived citizens of their magical towns, teaching people how to use their security enchantments and measures by sheer negative reinforcement.

The cries of outrage would have been deafening were it not so easily proven (by the fact these pranksters kept getting people, if nothing else) that those new townsfolk needed training to be cautious in who they opened the door to.

That's what the Foe Glass and Sneakoscope was there for, folks. You don't check them, you deserve what you get when you let people inside.

The old black dog was having more fun than any time since he'd left Hogwarts. He even petitioned once they move Snape's cottage to one of those magical towns, just so he could prank HIM with official sanction!

They had to turn the old dog down, of course. But, well, it didn't stop them from playing around with that staff for a little fun.

"Harry, what are we doing in this miserable area?" Susan asked for all the girls, who were staring around with a measurable amount of distaste at the partially abandoned and decrepit industrial slums they found themselves in.

The boy grinned back at her. "Oh, nothing. I just bought the mortgage on one of these tumbled-down wrecks of a house, that's all."

Not even Susan was going to be caught up by THAT old gag! Not anymore! She scowled, folded her arms in feminine outrage, and stamped her foot.

He blushed. "Well, Snape lives there; and as of today, he's a month behind on his rent payments - strange that he got distracted from paying them. I can't imagine how that happened. Justice being swift beyond all reason in the magical world, that means we get to ransack his place for any valuables, and if we deem them to be insufficient, throw him out."

Harry was of a sudden surrounded by sparkly-eyed girls who'd rather be there than anyplace else. "Oh?"

"Can we invite the rest of Hufflepuff House?" Susan and Hannah chorused.

Later, standing on a bridge, Hermione asked, "What does this button do?"

Luna glittered in reply. "I'm not sure, but when I pressed it, Snape's home reappeared at the bottom of the Thames River. Oh well, live and learn."

Spurred on by Sirius, Fred and George kept doing more and more amazing stuff like enchanting rings, making better potions, and so on. Harry and his girls had unanimously voted to present the twins with the Weasley ancestral manor, as well as the Weasley family automobile, although they could no longer call it a Ford Anglia, as it had grown a large number of legs in place of its now-vanished wheels, and was turning into something long and vaguely caterpillar-shaped with striped orange fur - a rather telling reminder of the effects of fairy magic on muggle machines (and they had cast rather a lot of spells on it to restore its condition), although it still functioned just fine, and was, if anything, more comfortable to ride in than before.

The headlights had also begun to look disturbingly like yellow eyes. Luna could swear she'd seen its front grill grin a few times.

Fred and George could not have been happier to have it. It even still flew in short bursts, too, and they swore the invisibility was better than before as they'd run the mutated vehicle down the streets (and across not a few walls and rooftops) of Edinburgh without a single muggle noticing.

There was also promise that the Weasley family farming and shipbuilding interests were going to get restored soon, as there'd been a tremendous and growing surge of outrage that was only getting mightier and shriller as more and more skullduggery got exposed under 'Dumbledore's' request to have all of his proxies and guardianships released.

This was a true outrage, not one of those 'flash-in-the-pan' upsets here one moment and gone the next. This wasn't splashing a little of the water in a tub, where things would settle down a moment later. This was dumping the entire tub over.

Trust for Dumbledore was vanishing about as fast as spilled water runs down the drain. This was in many ways worse than the Prophet disaster for him.

Hundreds of families had been robbed blind, and more injured, by that man's mad pursuit of both wealth and power. The outrage was still building to a crescendo on that issue, but all sides of the political spectrum had been injured, grievously, by that old man's power grabbing manipulations. There was no corner in which you could look without finding outrage against him.

Narcissa was collecting political clout right and left as she used the Potter and Darling proxies she held to shred the interconnecting webs of lies, using information the children fed her so she knew exactly what points to hit to do the most damage to the old man's clout and reputation. And she was proving a shrewd political foil to use in this arena.

Members of the Wizengamot were already calling for Dumbledore's blood.

Among several minor points already exposed, it turned out the Weasleys still owned the Chudley Cannons. They'd just signed over all rights and privileges to that ownership long ago, when deep in debt, and the one holding that paper was none other than Dumbledore (who had, along with it, control over most other teams). Yet since he'd just asked the magical court system to release those, they'd probably own the Cannons again in a practical sense soon.

Fred and George were already talking of taking over as professional Beaters, and drawing Charlie back under the call of family loyalty to be their Seeker.

Heck, there was a small chance they'd draw Oliver back out of France with an offer to be their Keeper; and if they could snag Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson to be their Chasers, Harry was predicting a huge surge in the Cannon's standing within the Pro Quidditch League. Although they'd first have to convince the latter two girls to stop chasing Harry. But Fred and George had stated (only half in jest) they'd be willing to marry them to do so.

Heck, they wanted to make it a family team anyway. This only fit with that.

The newly revised Cannons would not be able to beat the best teams in the League, but the current Gryffindor team was far and away better than the garbage that the Cannons had been fielding. Not only that, but the Gryffindor players were all young, and just growing into their skills. In a few years, given a good bit of training and growth, they just might have a shot at the top.

They'd just have to keep Ron off the team, as despite all his pretensions he played at the Cannon's current level (which was to say, miserable). Although Ginny could maybe work out as a reserve Chaser. That would fit their desire to field a family team. Heck, Percy had even made a decent reserve Keeper for Gryffindor until it became obvious that they'd have to pry the broom out of Oliver's cold, dead fingers before he'd surrender the position.

Molly didn't know what to think, torn between hero-worship for Dumbledore, shock and fire-spitting fury that he'd kept them all

impoverished this long time. But despite Harry's apprehensions, the Weasley family had already made the move to their new/old (orange) manor house on the outskirts of Godric's Hollow - they truly couldn't deny that to Fred and George, and those two had naturally brought the rest of the family along.

It was dangerous if they retained any loyalty to Dumbledore, but what could he do? Throw out Fred and George after all they'd done for him? Not hardly. It was enough to make Harry nervous, but the least he could do to prevent any future catastrophes would be to make sure they all read a copy of the last issue of the Daily Prophet and had their Obliviations reversed.

That triggered Molly off into a hell-spitting fury. It turned out the ancient and well regarded Headmaster had been manipulating lots of old allies over the years - and his idea of a good joke was to tell them all his plans, what he had been doing, and how this screwed them over, then Obliviating them of all that knowledge so they'd continue to trust him and carry out his orders.

Endless laughs.

The old fart had been cackling through his beard for years at innocent faces crushed as he'd told them his plans, then doubled the fun by chortling over those innocent, trusting gazes directed at him again after Obliviating them.

No, he'd been able to have his cake and eat it too: expose your vile plans and gloat over plots, then repair the damage by stripping those memories away. It was every mad villain's dream to be able to gloat yet not get caught for it, and the Headbastard had been getting away with it for years.

Molly was practically frothing at the mouth over it, almost ready to chew his legs off, should they meet again.

Arthur, unfortunately, was almost catatonic over the mess revealed, falling into drink as it got exposed just how many of his family had died serving in Dumbledore's plans, even while the old goat had been

robbing them blind - and effectively assisting with those deaths of his family members all the while.

This situation was, sadly, rather typical of the residents of Harry's new towns. A few promising members would bring in extended family he didn't feel nearly so certain about, most of whom would be devastated to one degree or another by the depths of the betrayals of Albus Dumbledore.

But it was the best they could get, as he didn't know anyone with family in the magical world who was completely unaligned with one side or another. It was a situation without easy resolution, unless he wanted to do what Luna Malfoy Lovegood suggested when she half-jokingly said, "You can't pick your relatives, so you must console yourself with the thought that you can kill them." And THAT certainly wouldn't make him any friends!

Heck, Harry's own family history, descended from two of Dumbledore's most ardent servants and tied to several more, would have made him suspicious of himself if he were to consider his role from an outside perspective!

No, the magical world was deeply split, and most families were at least partly divided. If they weren't allied to Dumbledore, they had some Death Eaters tucked away in the family tree somewhere, and often enough they had both.

For so long the magical world had been fed a false dichotomy: that if you did not belong to one side you had to join the other. So anyone who cared, who was motivated and wanted to do something to help his ideals progress, would have jumped in on one side or the other and pushed hard. And the ones who don't jump in are generally unmotivated, so not the ones you want.

Unmotivated people don't achieve anything. So you end up in a situation where you have to choose among the former adherents of either side, if you want any followers at all.

Given enough time, his citizens could come around. But they were undergoing some deep shifts in loyalties as they reread those papers

and had obliterated memories restored, so it was understandable they'd be confused for a while.

But that just underscored why Harry needed those recovered patients with the long term loyalty imprints: to have a solid core to build around so his towns didn't fall by betrayal before they truly had a chance to get started and have their loyalties sorted out.

Heck, obedience to one side or the other had been so ingrained for so long that it would be sheer REFLEX for certain people to sell him out until they had a chance to think things out all over again, reexamining all of their previous loyalties. Basically they had to build themselves a whole new world-view.

For so long they'd been sold on the idea of there being only two sides: The Dark and Dumbledore (who, as it turned out, was **also** Dark). Now they had to wake up to the fact that trying to select the lesser of two evils was still choosing to back evil.

It was time to retake their world, and that always started in people's minds. Harry could fix things, and was willing to work with his people. But until that came about, they were quite vulnerable to betrayals.

Speaking of betrayals naturally led to Dumbledore's agents, and that led to one still hunting them. They couldn't forget Moody was still out there, it didn't take long for Mr. Paranoia to find out that his dead people were still alive. And they learned he was still on the hunt when Trelawney, who still looked like Hermione thanks to that Polyjuice given to her by Harry shortly before she became a dryad, had been killed twice during the last week by Killing Curses mysteriously striking her in the back.

She'd changed her hair color to Hermione's brown and had been tending to shopping and other things the real fae trio could not manage time for, even on repeated days. But the mysterious ambushes had been meticulously planned, and they were concerned that worse was under development, since the killer was obviously getting informed that his target hadn't actually died.

And though the trio had the Fairy Queen's promise to have shared among them the protections offered by Harry's mother's sacrifice, they did not know how far to trust that, or what all it entailed. So would rather not be testing it by getting an AK in the back.

"I really think I ought to try healing Bellatrix," Harry gave his opinion. "Right now our attention is too focused on getting projects done. We don't have any to spare for looking over our shoulders or checking for ambushes at all hours - and certainly not enough to match one of the best in the business! So I'd like to put our bodyguard back on, well, guarding our bodies."

"There are no records, even in the magical world, of someone as badly wounded as her surviving," Hermione supplied. "But it seems to me that wizards would never be able to think as far as you did, using a charm for flowers on humans. That would be a smart thing, that's too much brain activity for the common wizard. So I think it would be alright."

Luna paused before delicately disagreeing. "In her own twisted way Bellatrix Black loves Harry." The LeStranges were now dead, and their properties turned over to her, so there was no barrier to accepting her back as a Black. "More than she ever did Riddle, because the Dark Idiot never returned any of her tiny gestures of affection, and Harry has. Harry didn't even realize he was doing it, that's just who he is. Just as I'm certain Riddle didn't realize what he was doing, that's just who he was."

Luna raised her clear, blue-eyed gaze to her friends. "She was desperate to be loved, and so did whatever she could to prove herself worthy of love by the people she felt ought to love her. Sadly, truly evil people are incapable of any love other than love of self. So her quest was hopeless, and her acts to prove herself only grew more extreme as she grew more desperate. Being the cruel and capricious creature she felt would please her family and their associates also drove her quite insane."

Hermione jerked as though stuck by a pin as she recalled something her mother once said about someone disgusting in their neighborhood, 'She was somebody's baby once'.

Babies aren't born with the ugly habits or evil personalities some people later take on. Babies come as sweet, little adorable bundles of love.

Hannah stifled a giggle over Loony Lovegood calling anyone ELSE insane! Susan elbowed her in the ribs. Luna came as part of the package. They had to get used to her, despite the reputation Ron and Ginny spread about her.

Luna continued, calmly noting this byplay but saying nothing of it, "Phoenix tears could cure her wounds, but not her mind, nor of the Mark on her body, and truly she deserves the best we can do for her. There is a better way," Luna intoned seriously. "And for that we must still wait a few days more."

Such was the trust of her two closest friends that though they looked at her in some amount of confusion, neither contradicted anything she said, dropping the topic instead of arguing or pressing for more details.

This, despite the fact that Harry knew that removing the Dark Mark would surely kill her, even if she were at full health and despite all he knew about it.

It was designed that way.

"Well," Hermione offered, "in that case I'd really like to add another defense - one hopefully that this assassin knows nothing about, so won't know that he needs to circumvent. Just like our fire immunity surprised him the first time. And for that, why not another animagus form?"

The others all looked at her askance.

"But the Ministry insists a person can only have one animal form." Susan was her aunt's niece, and had overheard countless conversations. Not that there had been many animagi registered this century, but still...

"Ridiculous!" Hermione proclaimed, all a-quiver with excitement over the knowledge she was about to share. "You know Ceridwen, whose famous cauldron you gave me? The one used to mix a potion where the first three drops give wisdom and the rest is a fatal poison? When she tried to mix it, three hot drops spilled onto the thumb of the young boy she had stirring it, burning him. He instinctively put his thumb in his mouth, and instantly gained great wisdom and knowledge. But she was so upset he got the benefit, instead of her ugly son, that Ceridwen fought him. And the way the legends describe that battle, he first turned himself into a hare. She became a greyhound. He became a fish and jumped into a river. She turned into an otter. He turned into a bird; she became a hawk. Finally, he turned into a single grain of corn. She then became a hen and ate him."

"That sounds like a wizard's duel, out of the Sword in the Stone movie," Luna told them. "Each side transforming into shapes chosen to escape or destroy the other."

Everyone looked at her.

"What?" The blonde protested. "Of course I'm related to some characters in the Aurthurian tales! Every wizard claims he is, even if he isn't, only I am one of the few who can prove a connection. I think that movie should be next up in our History class. It's important material to cover!"

"Well," Harry was pondering aloud and trying to subtly change the subject. "Whatever methods they used, they don't sound like the results of the process that give you an animagus transformation. Riddle went through that, and it is intended to lock you into one potential form."

"But you haven't been through those rituals," Hannah pointed out the obvious. "You three just drank polyjuice."

The fairy trio stared at each other.

"She's right, you know," Luna conceded.

Harry nodded contritely. "And Zeus, the Greek wizard, was famous for changing his shape to whatever he wanted it to be. Riddle thought it was one of the abilities he'd stolen from fairies."

"Ha!" Hermione stood taller, feeling vindicated. "As noble fae, we should be physically capable of changing into any number of forms! We have Nemean Lions for combat, so a unicorn would be great for speed, healing, and logistic support. Werewolves are amazingly fast, but slower than unicorns, making the equines extremely fast land-runners. Good at dodging, too!"

"Highly resistant to all forms of curses," Luna began to nod her agreement. "Willingly given unicorn blood is among the most powerful potions ingredients in existence, so adding some to Polyjuice Potion will allow Harry, Hermione, and I to take on unicorn shapes, almost certainly." Raising her disturbingly piercing blue-eyed gaze to the others, she said, "The powers are another matter entirely. One does not assume the mantle of so pure a creature by so base a potion, no matter how well intended."

"What do you mean?" Hermione felt some of the wind go out of her sails.

Luna fixed her with a cold glance. "The magic of a unicorn comes through their purity and the purity of a unicorn is not a part of their bodies, it is an aspect of their souls that reflects in their bodies. And one doesn't simply chug a dose of polyjuice to change one's soul."

Harry, while pondering, declared slowly, "I think we could do it - not with the blood, or a potion, you're right about that. But with the heart, and the right ritual, I think we might be able to devise some means to create a reflection to mimic their powers." Seeing the eyes of several girls on him, he explained, "Voldemort was big into certain rituals, and he learned all sorts, good as well as bad, hoping to pervert some good ones to go his way, or at the very least learn a few useful bits from them to improve his dark empowerment rituals. He didn't ever succeed on the really good ones, some things are just too pure to be corrupted by even the foulest magic - but that doesn't mean he didn't try. I was thinking maybe I could reverse some of what he was doing and take one of those dark ones he'd created and try to reverse

engineer the original Light version out of it - and there are good means to strengthen the soul."

Harry drew a deep breath, then intoned slowly, "His primary interest since he was a young boy were rituals to empower himself, and many empowerment rituals require the sacrifice of a magical creature - chiefly the dark ones of course. But ancient Greek wizards made a specialty out of hunting nymphs, and were big into sacrificing them to steal portions of their power. In fact, they preyed upon them until they'd nearly wiped out the nymph populations of the world. Generations of Greek wizards seeking after power took a world rich in those lovely nature spirits and left us with one devastated for lack of them. The only reason Riddle didn't use those rites was because there were no suitable nymphs left that he could find - and remember this was a man who successfully tracked ancient artifacts that others had considered lost."

"What about the naiads?" Susan blinked up at him.

Harry smiled. "Supreme in their environment, and useless to him outside it. You can catch dryads or most other nymphs without killing them and subject them to involuntary rites to grant you some portions of her power. But while you can kill naiads by drying up their lakes or rivers or streams or whatever, you can't just pluck them out to use like they were a potion ingredient. They are one of the few types of nymphs useless for those sorts of rituals."

"So, this helps us how?" Hermione cocked her head at him.

Harry wet his lips. "Well, Riddle did his best trying to adapt those same Greek power-stealing rituals to magical creatures other than nymphs. He tried all sorts: vampires, Peruvian Vipertooths and of course basilisks. But none of those really worked the way he wanted them to because they lacked that essential fairy element that so inclines itself toward change."

"However, unicorns count as fae," the bookworm blinked her understanding.

"Backing up a step, couldn't we use some of his rituals?" Hannah asked of him, wide-eyed. "If it was for a good purpose, I mean."

Harry soberly shook his head. "You do not understand true evil, and if you did, you would run screaming from it. There are kinds of magic that serve few purposes, none of them beneficial to others."

Hermione cocked her head at him in curiosity. "Don't you recall the original versions? You did say you got his memories."

Now Harry supplied them with a wry grin. "Sadly for this circumstance, Tom didn't have a perfect memory of everything he ever read or did. He didn't bother to recall the original forms any more than most people recall their math homework from fifty years gone."

Hermione noted wryly that he'd said 'most people' and 'fifty years gone' - just to spoil her comeback that she'd saved it all in a file at home, and could go over it at a moment's notice.

Hermione then noted that he was watching her reaction with bemusement and gave her own grin in reply.

"Anyway," Harry shook himself clear of the momentary distraction of teasing Hermione. "One of the rituals long ago used to empower the sons of Irish kings was to infuse them with the heart of a deer so they could become fast and agile - and the nobles didn't take kindly to paying for magic only for an old phony to mumble some words and run away with their gold. The youths they subjected to this got some rigorous tests before the kings paid their wizards. In one popular test the youth's hair would be braided, and he would be pursued through the forest; he would fail if he was caught, if a branch cracked under his feet, or if the braids in his hair were disturbed. He would have to be able to leap over a branch the height of his forehead, pass under one as low as his knee, and pull a thorn from his foot without slowing down."

"That's very much like what we are trying to do," Luna agreed slowly.

Harry nodded. "But Riddle modified that ritual, turning it into one to grant himself the heart of a vampire. Then, when that didn't work, the

heart of a snake. That one succeeded, but remnants of the first attempt made his eyes glow red and gave him a thirst for blood. Anyway, in both cases he was trying to steal magic as well as physical traits, and I think he succeeded."

He looked to his girls and gave them a shrug. "I can at least research this."

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Author's Notes:

Well, I originally had the resurgence of evil in this chapter, but the stuff before it grew so big that got bumped to the next chapter.

Don't worry, we've had our happy little celebration that the threat of the Death Star is over. Now it's time for the enemy to make some moves, and prove just why he was so scary in the first place.

Chapter Sixty-Three
by Lionheart

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You know, it amazes me how many people caught on to the Totoro reference. I hadn't even named how many legs our burgeoning catbus had yet! I'm a little shocked (and only slightly envious) how many have catbus plushies.

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Retired master auror Mad-Eye Moody, hit wizard and private assassin to the Chief of the Wizengamot knew that whoever he had been tasked to kill, it was not Hermione Granger.

No thirteen year old girl, no matter how bright, would be able to evade the deaths he'd plotted for her. The first time, the troll and fire trap, might have been luck if you assumed a near-miraculous level of it. Mad-Eye Moody could not discount that entirely, as he knew such bursts of insane luck did occur from time to time. It would have taken something amazing to do it, but he couldn't entirely discount the possibility.

Still, that trap ought to have extinguished the life of any witch or wizard, Light or Dark, save perhaps Voldemort or Dumbledore alone, and he knew for certain that no thirteen year old girl was getting to that level, no matter how hard working or brilliant she was.

Heck, countless muggleborn girls as brilliant as she was had been used up and spat out by the Pureblood controlled Ministry for years.

But even if he discounted her escape from the first trap as a brilliant stroke of blind luck, no matter his precautions against luck mattering in the slightest, his next attack had been a killing curse right in her back while she was out of school at market and perfectly vulnerable.

He'd not missed. He'd not been distracted. He hadn't mistaken someone else for his target (anyone could get out of school at any hour provided they had parental permission - something the staff was

anxious their students not learn about. But a girl like her was just the type to look it up). Nor had he made the rookie mistake of firing off a spell and then running for cover while it was still in the air and merely assuming it had hit the target. He was a professional. He was an assassin. More to the point, he enjoyed his work.

No, he'd done his job properly. He'd marked his target and tracked her over more than an hour, making sure that whole while she did not drink anything, so he could not have been deceived by polyjuice. He'd made sure using his eye that she had no unforeseen variables, like an adorable pet kitten tucked in a backpack where the kitten might die instead of the girl wearing the pack. And he'd made the attack from cover and watched as the spell struck his target. No brave hero had leapt in the way, nor had any idiot stumbled into the path of his curse. It had struck home, and he'd watched her go down.

That was about as final and certain as things got in the magical world.

Nonetheless, she'd been up and back at market the next day. That just didn't happen by accident, and it didn't happen without some serious magic; magic that a thirteen year old girl just would not have had access to. They not only took years to learn, they relied on NEWT levels of other studies to serve as a foundation. Tom Riddle had set the record, making a horcrux at sixteen. And he knew the type, this girl would not have dipped into the Dark Arts yet.

Nevertheless, to test it he'd hit her again, this time carefully watching for the telltale shade to escape from the falling body. There had been none.

What he privately suspected was the case was that someone was using a simulacrum. A rough statue made of snow, given a heart of stone and treated with ointments not unlike polyjuice, charged with a person's blood to give it that person's shape and form, then animated with advanced magics.

But that magic was also far beyond the girl's level, and half the spells to create one were illegal in Britain and existed only in dusty family libraries, things such a girl would have had no access to.

So if someone was creating simulacrams of Hermione Granger, the question became: who and why?

Moody could almost discount the second question. If the girl was worth killing then she was worth something to someone, and whoever that was might be motivated enough to try saving her. But the only person Albus had reported her being close to was Harry Potter, and that threw the whole issue wide open. The boy himself couldn't have worked that advanced magic any more than she could've, but as the darling of the wizarding world almost anyone would have enough motivation to step in on his behalf to protect him and his girls. That suspect list included everyone in Britain, including master auror Moody himself. He'd accepted protection contracts before this where he had afterwards Obliviated the details of the job from out of his mind.

No one could drag details out of a mind that didn't know them, and the best security was always a surprise to those who crossed it. Nor could he be compelled or Imperioused to compromise a security arrangement he didn't remember setting up.

He charged ruinous fees for that kind of service, but he did offer it. And that offer had been taken up by a few customers. He could not recall who - that was part of the whole security package.

Even Dumbledore himself could have protected the girl. The old goat fonder did things like that from time to time. In fact every so often Moody would get a call to try and break some security of the Headmaster's just to see if it could be done, and if so reveal weak points so they could be fixed. There was no reason to assume this might not be another instance of that.

No, before he went any further, the master auror needed more information. An elite hit wizard like he was simply didn't accept a task without a good and detailed profile of the target, and his briefing was sadly lacking.

He'd have words with Albus over that. The old man did love to play his little games, and that included sending him off with incomplete profiles from time to time. The assassin always made sure to charge

him punitive fees for it, but it hadn't stopped the goat molesting old fart yet. But always before once he'd run into one of those little traps, the Headmaster had been there, laughing, to tell him to carry on anyway.

Now he wasn't.

Moody was not a fool. He had tracking and monitoring charms of his own, as well as the official warning device Dumbledore had given him to alert the auror to the Headmaster's demise, and the Master Manipulator had been dying like flies these past couple of weeks.

Someone had been killing off the Twinkling Tyrant, as often as a couple of times a day. And Dumbledore in return wanted someone killed who could not be killed by any of the usual methods.

Moody did not think these facts were unrelated. But he was a killer, not a detective. He'd always left anything beyond the most basic investigations to those more inclined, and his prime source of information was Dumbledore himself. And according to his latest reports from devices and monitoring charms, the man had been petrified and then transfigured, taken out of action entirely.

That made Moody's priority to get Albus Dumbledore back into action. Any side interests or simple (or not so simple, as it turned out) assassinations had to be put on hold while he pursued his primary responsibility.

Moody was one of a handful of people the Headmaster trusted enough to have reciprocal agreements with, bound by Unbreakable Oaths to restore one another from their hidden horcruxes. Moody was not supposed to know the identities of any of the others, but Snape was simply too obvious to ignore, and he had one or two private suspicions about others, as well. Suspicions he was careful not to confirm, as Veritaserum only revealed facts, not ideas.

Although it had frankly surprised him that Lucius Malfoy remained dead, and did not get better first thing the next morning. Those two had enjoyed their little games against each other too much, yet had

not felt any of the heat of true rivals, for Moody not to get ideas about secrets under the surface.

No, their tennis match of authority, constantly one-upping each other, had been amusing enough to watch. But it had borne Dumbledore's fingerprints all over it in the way they had tied up the magical government so firmly between them, each one sounding the rallying cry of his cause against the other.

Still, regardless of who else might be tasked to do this, Moody was next in line. The device had alerted him it was his turn to locate and recover the Headmaster's remains and reanimate them. It did not matter if he was stone as the horcrux provided a link to follow if one knew the spells.

Or he could turn the horcrux itself into a new copy of the Headmaster, using it as the stone to make the heart of a simulacrum. The body would appear real and it would be the Headmaster's spirit fragment lodged in the horcrux animating it. Nobody would know the difference, and no one was more suited than he to find out what had been done to his previous remains.

That explained why Moody was digging through the Hogwarts basement, using his wand to lift aside beams and repairing structures of fallen roof and walls, seeking after the Headmaster's primary horcrux.

The Headmaster had left a horcrux with Moody, but he'd prefer to use the original if possible. Links were strongest between the one most recently used and the body it had helped to create.

Besides, once revived the first question out of the Headmaster's mouth would be what had happened to his original horcrux and why Snape wasn't the one reviving him. Either way, to get that information he'd have to dig through here, so why not recover this horcrux at the same time? The auror was even doing a good job of repairing damaged sections as he excavated the collapsed area, as he wasn't about to risk a poorly put together bit dropping a stone on his head as he passed under it. Being paranoid meant being careful about everything, big things as well as small things.

He didn't want to activate his own horcrux, or the precautions surrounding it that would see that it got put to use.

Tom Riddle had been the youngest, but he was a fool if he thought he was the only one who had ventured into multiple horcruxes. Moody alone had three.

Of course, the magical world was full of surprises, as Moody learned when the mud and algae he'd taken for a water leak on dusty, pulverized rocks (perfectly understandable given the busted pipes running through that area) surged up and attacked him as he lifted aside the collapsed masonry that had been covering it, revealing itself to be instead a giant bundimun.

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Aberforth Dumbledore looked up just as the compulsion fell on him. Without saying a word, he stopped polishing the counter of his bar and went into the back room, as if after something.

Instead, he took the Fidelius-covered stairs to the sub-basement below the wine cellar. He'd long since given up cursing his brother for trapping him into this miserable state. He was just as powerful as his famous sibling, every bit as well trained, and condemned to live a perfectly normal life without showing any exceptional behavior or abilities by an oath his brother forced from him.

All so he could keep secrets safe and remain beyond suspicion.

The ritual chamber below his bar was fantastic, a match for any of the most advanced such chambers prepared for the Ministry's official use. Everlasting candles hung suspended in mid air. Gold leaf lined the carefully carved runes in the walls and floor, while the ceiling had the same enchantments as the roof of the Great Hall, so as to bring genuine moon or sunlight down for the rites that required them.

No expense had been spared. But in order to keep it secret and safe the workers who had constructed it had all been killed. Thus, it was the last of its kind, as the clan that had made them no longer existed.

Stepping across to a still pool of water in one of the attached antechambers, Aberforth began the ritual to call forth images of what he needed to know.

He was his brother's slave, bound by him since their sister's death to serve him unquestioningly in anything he demanded. In the many years it had been since his enraged brother tore his freedom from him that day, Aberforth had become expert on anything his brother needed doing - and before his stroke of luck that had dropped Trelawney into Albus' power, he'd needed an expert at the arts of Divination to help him with his plans.

So Aberforth had become one. He'd served in that capacity for more than a century before being laid aside when his brother landed a genuine oracle.

But Albus wasted nothing. He always carefully stored his toys when he was not currently using them, holding them in reserve against a future need.

The first thing Aberforth learned was that his brother lay under a black cloud of Fate. Malaclaw venom, obviously, as he'd always been careful to perform the rites of Cleansing after his murders, so the spirits of his victims could not find him for vengeance.

It had been a long time since Albus had updated his brother's programming, so it was with heavy heart that Aberforth began the long and laborious process of performing a full and complete check of all possibilities before acting on long-disused instructions.

It would take him weeks, but his brother would be restored from the horcrux that acted as the chain on Aberforth's soul, the metal plate embedded in the back of his skull, covered over by runes and also by skin and hair.

The first of thirteen segments of Albus' soul, twelve being objects, and the thirteenth being Albus Dumbledore himself.

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Albus Dumbledore had planned for a dizzying array of eventualities. Anyone with the time, intellect, and resources he did in his position would've done the same. Besides, it had helped him stave off boredom to play little intellectual games with his trusted counsel of portrait advisors over all of those placid in-between years of peaceful consolidation. He'd had years upon years of listening to former headmasters tell him how they'd challenge him and pick apart his plans. And whenever one of those 'what if' scenarios turned up a tragic weakness in his defenses, it got fixed.

And he hadn't always been unlucky either.

The Dumbledore House in Godric's Hollow had been largely forgotten to all but a handful of history books. There was a good reason for this, as it'd been put under Fidelius by Albus Dumbledore not long after he came into possession of his family's home. However, unfortunately for our heroes for whom so much had been going right, Albus had also used the location to practice on during his introduction to the art of warding. Ward schemes had been set up and torn down over it many times, leaving it an eclectic mix of obscure and little known ones (the last Albus had practiced there) including an anti-fairy ward. No modern wizarding home would have that, as it stood in the way of having one of their traditional Christmas decorations, but in this case it stood Dumbledore in good stead, as without that Harry and his wives would have seen through the Fidelius that was the main protection of the property.

This was important, because it was within that secure and largely forgotten location that the Headmaster had hidden his third horcrux. And, by a complex series of spells and monitoring devices, it determined that Dumbledore had been gone from the world for fourteen days. That was long enough for any of his more immediate protections to have fetched him back into the world of the living, so according to preset parameters it was time for this backup to restore him to life.

As far as the 'what if' scenarios worked out by him and the portraits of former headmasters, the rest of his precautions were so thick and varied as to be impenetrable in all but one way: old age.

So, they'd very cunningly seen fit to deal with that too.

This precaution was set up long before Dumbledore had come into possession of a genuine philosopher's stone, and it had been presumed back then he'd never get one. So he'd been forced to defeat old age another way. And then, once he'd gotten the stone, hadn't seen fit to change those precautions.

After all, you could see that as a backup precaution in case he ever lost the stone. He wanted to be prepared for everything, no matter how remote.

Presuming that Albus Dumbledore lived a full and healthy life, whether using phoenix tears to treat every twinge and sniffle prolonged that span or not, eventually he would die. Now, if he died in combat that was one thing, and he'd be brought back via horcrux to a much younger body. But supposing no one did kill him, that he lived until years claimed him (and it was the job of his little games to plan for every eventuality, no matter how unlikely) then he could not be restored into a body that had degenerated that way.

A younger body didn't stop one's horcrux from growing old. And a horcrux provided no defense against the march of years. An ordinary mage who aspired to immortality using that method would die, and his horcrux with him, when his normal lifespan had passed.

Albus felt he had nicely circumvented this by placing each horcrux into its own specially warded box, where time within was held in virtual stasis. It was a very expensive way to keep potion ingredients fresh, but he thought that he was better served by preserving his immortality with it. So, while his body grew old, his horcruxes did not.

Time did not pass for them while they were safely stored away. Even the one implanted in the back of his brother's head was encased in a small warded space sealed inside of the metal plate he'd grafted there, a tiny hinged door the only hint that was anything more than a playing card sized piece of rune covered metal. The space beyond was not much thicker than a paper match ordinarily, but had been expanded via magic to a more generous size.

His brother would have to rip open the flesh on the back of his head to get at the horcrux to use it, but other people's pain had never bothered Albus.

No, he had one guardian for each horcrux, each bound by mutual unbreakable oaths to restore the other, and each guardian had their own horcrux stored under frozen time just as his were. He saw no point in acquiring suitable guardians if he just had to keep replacing them every so often. And he intended this setup to last forever.

Albus Dumbledore planned to the point where what most would call paranoia was childish and clumsy by comparison, simply the beginnings of his ploys.

His theory was that a horcrux kept in such a box ought to last forever. But among former Ravenclaw headmasters an alternate theory had been raised as possible, that a horcrux might acquire the age of the person it brought back to life - it was his own soul, after all. There had to be connections. So it was possible that a regularly used horcrux would die just as soon as though it had not been in a time-suspending box at all.

Unacceptable.

And it was for that eventuality that Albus had prepared his house in Godric's Hollow, to serve as a backup location to start anew from, using a horcrux that had been carefully disassociated from all others.

Just in case his original body, the horcrux he'd been using, and all of the guardians of his other horcruxes perished due to old age, he'd prepared this little spot in order to bring him back regardless.

Paranoid didn't even begin to scratch the surface of Dumbledore's plans.

So, having been altered to his dying and not coming back, automated measures began the process of bringing a young clone of Dumbledore to life.

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Moody sputtered, spitting out dirt as he'd been forced to dig himself out of a shallow grave. There were as many different rituals for restoring a dead man to life as there were horcrux-using mages who'd developed them.

Snape preferred his potions, as did Dumbledore. But both of them were potions masters.

Moody had other interests, and necromantic rites were a specialty. Death was his bailiwick, and the assassin was comfortable with it. About the only disadvantage to this rite was it did not bring back more of his body than he'd had during the past few months of life. So it did not restore things like his missing eye or leg.

Still, it was intensely private. The mad-eyed auror did not like to have people observing him during moments of weakness.

The cloaked figure who had revived him nodded her head as he pulled himself free of the last little bits of dirt, already packing her bags of ritual components away.

Already obliterated, she departed without a word, which was just as Moody liked it.

Dragging together the rotted corpse garments that were a necessary part of this particular rite, Moody covered himself, seized his wand, and departed. There were many things he had to reexamine, not the least of which was how he had been assassinated (Moody did not believe in coincidence. He was on a job to kill someone, moved to protect an ally who was being killed, and got killed himself. To him that was a signed note, saying: enemy action), but for now his highest priority was to restore his intelligence contacts.

And that meant reviving Dumbledore using the horcrux left with him, not the original he'd gone fishing in the Hogwarts basement after.

Moody was not a man who'd walk into the same trap twice.

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Hermione looked up to see Susan and Hannah clustered tight together come into the room where she was studying that book on Exorcism herself, feeling a bit left behind by the rest of Hogwarts in that area of study.

Hannah shoved her friend forward, and Susan sidled up, declaring, "You know, with how good you three guys are at fighting, Hannah and I have decided to be healers to back you up!"

Hermione paused a moment to lick her lips in contemplation before saying, "You know, it was a muggle author by the name of Robert A. Heinlein who I believe put it best. He said 'A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, and lastly die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.' "

She busied herself while talking. "In something like an army, where you have large numbers of people but limited time and money for training, specializing makes some sense; you train people more quickly that way, and have enough people to special-task some. But for your own life, your skill set is going to be with you always, so you want it to be as broad as possible. And in a small group like ours we'd best be able to have each of us do everything, just to be better prepared against all contingencies. We have time and money to afford training, but very few people. So in most ways that gives us the reverse situation of an army, and we've got to cram as much skill into our few people as possible. So, by all means become healers, but that won't save you from becoming expert fighters or curse breakers too."

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Author Notes:

Other people SAY Moody is paranoid. But few people HAVE him paranoid, especially to this extent.

For a quick recap: Dumbledore dies, and Snape is first in line to bring him back using horcrux at Hogwarts. Then there are some backup measures in place to make certain that happens regardless of minor difficulties or hiccups. If Snape (or the Hogwarts failsafes) fail to bring him back it then becomes Moody's job. And, if Moody dies before bringing him back, it goes to Aberforth. Measures beyond that are unknown, not having been revealed to us at present.

Then, entirely apart from that chain of command, there was an entirely separate measure put into place for in case they all failed, and that one got activated by the sheer time involved they were taking in bringing him back.

A bit of crossed wires, but he'd never envisioned being killed in quite so many ways so quickly, and it has stressed his precautions.

So, not only is Dumbledore coming back, he is currently being brought back by no less than three separate sources: Moody, Aberforth, and the automated measures in Godric's Hollow. Each one is going to give him its own body, so there will be three, count them THREE separate Albus Dumbledores running around - NONE of them with malaclaw venom in their bodies, and unfortunately for everyone good and true, they will cooperate as they are, in essence, all the same soul in control of different bodies, just like fingers of the same hand. And even one without malaclaw venom would be a significant danger.

The Empire is Striking Back indeed.

Chapter Sixty-Four by Lionheart

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Unaware of the building danger, Harry and his fiancées had continued on with their lives in a more or less orderly fashion. They made their first shipment of ink, taking over sales on Dumbledore's monopoly, and got rather surprised by how much cash that drew in. Although it did cost them a fair amount to purchase barrels to store it in, as Trelawney refused to have her beautiful wood stained with black writing ink.

Dumbledore had arrangements with everyone to restore to him used barrels and fined them for any damage, so he'd only been forced to buy them once, long ago. But that was a cost they had to pay up front to take over the business, just like there were surprises about taking back over sale of farm produce from the old man - this in spite of that having once been a Potter business, and they'd left Harry records on how they'd done it.

Harry had returned Madam Pince to her duties right after Bellatrix had been petrified so no one would notice her missing. He'd Confounded her to continue on in the vein Bellatrix had been pursuing, restoring the library to its pre-censorship condition, making available lost materials in big displays right up front where Ravenclaws could descend on them like starving wolves.

Dumbledore, having achieved his own animagus transformation, discovered that it had certain advantages he didn't want others to have, so from his beginning tenure as transfiguration professor, started to leave out those parts of the material that were necessary for the change. He also began to cull the useful or pertinent books on the subject out of the library until the only ones left were basically worthless at best, outright harmful at worst. James was able to sidestep that because his family library still detailed the procedure in its true and accurate form, and he helped his friends.

McGonagall had achieved hers before Dumbledore had eliminated enough material and references to make it impossible. Even so, she'd

faced more difficulties than most and was rather proud of herself for her success.

It was one of the extra projects hanging around the edges of Harry's 'to do' plate: find a way to modify the current ritual so it allowed non-fae multiple animal forms.

Not currently a priority, but in the 'it would be nice' category.

As part of their general precautions Narcissa had produced more sets of silver weapons and armor for Susan and Hannah to wear, and while delivering them mentioned as an aside there were a few books on wand manufacture in the infamous Black Library.

Illegal? Yes. But that hadn't yet stopped the Black family, being illegal barely slowed them down, even if they hadn't produced any wand crafting experts.

They collected lots of illegal things. That was just one on the list.

On discovering this, Harry couldn't wait to start studying in the Black family library. And naturally Hermione was even more eager than he to get at all of those lovely and delicious books.

Well, actually 'lovely and delicious' was subject to debate. They weren't called the Black family for nothing. They had some truly horrendous spells in there, some of which Harry proclaimed could be tied to defensive wards to trigger on any intruders.

Which would be a good idea, actually, seeing as a person's ward schemes were like a fingerprint, and right now he was using Voldemort's. That not only made his wards seem like Tom Riddle's to anyone who was investigating them it meant that dark idiot could understand to remove them better. Anyone who had faced the Dark idiot's ward schemes could too.

So anything to change that, like new spells to work in to replace old, would freshen up that style a bit and confuse those trying to identify it. And he did want his places protected as best as he was able.

Harry had collected up the Black family properties along with the Potter ones (with a couple of exceptions like Godric's Hollow), including their played out mines - just because he was being thorough. Who knew what his ancestors had hidden in some of those spaces? Illegal dragon hatcheries was just one of the things he knew of that was hidden down there. But anything the family wanted kept away from prying eyes might have been stashed down there.

And if they were, he didn't want to miss acquiring them.

Luna controlled several generations of illegally accumulated Malfoy family wealth, and she'd wanted him to hide that too. So he was a busy beaver.

Still, when Narcissa hinted that the Black library had one or two books on wand manufacture, Harry dropped many lesser priorities to look into that.

But, once discovered, that was a daunting task. They had thousands of books stored in each of dozens of different houses with no organization or filing system whatsoever. Many of the books were unmarked, or deliberately disguised, and included countless private journals rambling about anything.

To read this massive library, Harry created a portrait of himself, then set it before an automated reading stand that would flip pages or change books on verbal command. A painting could give verbal commands, and the portrait Harry could thus skim over a large volume of Dark material that he already knew from Tom Riddle's memories, looking for those occasional bits that were new. A verbal-command quill could then highlight the new stuff and bookmark it, saving the place for Harry to read himself later.

In this way he could sort a large volume of material to pick out those gems he didn't already know in a short amount of time, because the drudge work was being done by a painting instead.

It could sift the entire library that way.

And besides, Bellatrix would expect it of him when she returned, and he could hardly keep the mask in place that allowed him to control her if he did not match up to that very reasonable (for Voldemort) expectation. He had to not only act delighted to have access to those books, but actually learn stuff from them. And, who knew? Maybe it had counters for some of Voldy's better abilities. Most of the books of that sort would tell you "take care lest you bring an X close to this, as that will unravel all of it's power!"

And really, what knowledge could be more priceless? That told you what to find in order to counter some of Voldemort's toys and abilities. It highlights their weaknesses by the very warnings it gives intending to protect them.

All of the best and most fearsome Dark Arts had loopholes and weaknesses like that - just like a basilisk could be destroyed by the simple crowing of a rooster.

And speaking of basilisks.

Harry's newest basilisk had hatched. He'd taken to carrying it around with him, sealed up in a cage disguised as a book in one of his expanded pockets. The gaze of a newly hatched basilisk was nothing, and wouldn't be until the tiny King of Serpents had grown a little older. So that was why he wanted to keep it with him, to make sure it matured at three times normal rate as he went through his repeated days.

He hadn't been able to repeat that trick of aging it a thousand years in a second. So was stuck for now with normal advancement. Fairies are unpredictable. And, he was finding, that often applied even to themselves.

The gaze of an immature basilisk wasn't all that special either. Much like an immature mandrake plant, they lacked the full adult's killing power. But still, the older it got the more powerful its magic, and the more useful the parts that could be pulled from it.

Just like his dragons, he didn't have to kill them to get their skins. The hides of dragons were not as magically protective as a basilisk's, but were more physically tough.

Also, using that Dental Potion he hoped to develop he could even harvest fangs, then replace them!

Trelawney had seen ahead (odd, that. He was unused to picturing her as an oracle, but with the damage to her gift restored, that's what she was) and one of the creatures put through that fire protection ritual before the time ran out on them and they'd hit the Fall Equinox was Harry's own Demiguise.

With the beast itself immune to fire, so was its hair. So with more doses of dragon whisker soup he now had a practically limitless supply of material for fireproof invisibility cloaks.

He gave one to the dryad, naturally.

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"Hermione, I've been meaning to ask, do we know what specific kind of oak Trelawney is?" To Harry this was very important. His efforts had turned Petunia's rather ordinary lawn into an award winning landscaped garden.

One did not do that by merely planting 'a rose'. You had to know the specific species and cultivar of rose, what characteristics this bush had that made it suitable for that spot, and weigh those against other possible varieties. This was the essence of what made a modern gardener, and Harry was admittedly a very good one. His work had won awards in a very highly competitive field.

And while he knew they'd assumed Trelawney was a white oak, without a tree identification book on hand to reference it was impossible to be certain as there were several related species that shared many identifying traits.

Besides, there were many trees called white oak.

However Hermione had recently been doing research into dryads, and she huffed at him. "Really, Harry! Don't you know anything about this?"

The boy blinked in surprise. As previously mentioned, he was an expert in this field - both about plants, and about nymphs.

Then she giggled, having gotten him back for his teasing her about math homework, and the mood relaxed. "Actually, Harry, I wasn't quite joking. This is one of those areas where muggles get almost as silly as wizards. You see, it's one job of scientists to classify things - only they don't know when to stop! Their job says do it, and they get status from doing it, only there's no provision for saying 'okay, that's enough now', so they never give up trying to break things down further into smaller and smaller categories so they can have something to name after themselves. It's institutionalized, and that's a form of bureaucracy, and those never make sense. They always start out with good intentions, but they get more and more insane the longer they run. It's ridiculous, but some of them make Wonderland seem rational!"

Harry blinked. He'd been quite proud of his accomplishments in this area. But it seemed his bushy haired friend may have found one of those holes in his knowledge base. The boy actually knew a lot, both from his own studies and inherited from Voldemort. But nobody knew everything.

The boy flopped into a seat, teasing, "So, teach me oh great wise one, impart to this humble seeker your knowledge."

Hermione giggled. "Okay, it's really very simple. Imagine that all human beings suddenly froze in place and could neither move nor speak. Then picture some aliens coming down, someone who has no knowledge of Earth, and is trying to classify us. They start with the easy stuff. Humans are different than plants or beasts, so they call us humans. Then they continue on just as our muggle scientists have done, breaking that definition smaller and smaller. They start on some more pertinent details, some of us originate in Europe, others in Africa, Asia, America, what have you. That's still useful knowledge. But then just like us they don't know when to stop. Soon we're broken

down by height, then weight, and a variety of other factors - useful to a doctor to figure out your health problems, but not so much an aspect of race. But then they still don't stop, and go yet further, until you have them picking out individual specimens, cloning them, and calling that its own subspecies! So eventually you'd have the Snivellus cultivar of the Greasius Gittus species of the Tall-Hook-Nosed genus."

Harry broke out laughing until he wept. "It's true!" He proclaimed, as he was rising up off the floor. "They find a single specimen of a tree, or whatever, and make millions of clones of it, then treat it like it was something entirely different than the rest of the species, and call any mixes hybrids!"

Hermione nodded firmly, having deeply enjoyed Harry's reaction to her point. "That's actually not an exaggeration. All commercial pistachios are clones of a single tree that someone found in their garden that produced an unusual number of nuts. They liked having so many nuts, so cloned that tree literally millions of times. They gave it a name and call it its own cultivar, but that's really like grabbing Snape and calling him his own species! Then other alien scientists come along and compare his greasy hair to other examples of humanity that are also poorly groomed, and claim they are related! If we want to go that route, then our dryad is of the Trelawney cultivar!"

Once more Harry broke down laughing into helplessness.

Hermione's enjoyment over his reaction grew yet further, and she let loose a smile that she was no longer able to contain. "If she were human, Trelawney would be stuck with whatever traits she got born with, improved somewhat by her own efforts. But she IS a dryad, so that means fairy, and that means at least somewhat mutable. So truly she should have any aspect of oak trees that she wants to, and right now is leaning toward white oak. But she could mix that with aspects of swamp oak, or pin oak or any other oak she wanted to. I'm really not sure of her limits."

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"Hermione, what are you reading?"

Instead of answering directly the bookworm simply began to read aloud, "A Welsh or English military archer during the 14th and 15th Century was expected to shoot at least ten "aimed shots" per minute. An experienced military longbowman was expected to shoot twenty aimed shots per minute. A typical military longbow archer would be provided with between 60 and 72 arrows at the time of battle, which would last the archer from three to six minutes, at full rate of shooting. Thus, most archers would not loose arrows at this rate, as it would exhaust even the most experienced man. Not only are the arms and shoulder muscles tired from the exertion, but the fingers holding the bowstring become strained; therefore, actual rates of fire in combat would vary considerably. Ranged volleys at the beginning of the battle would differ markedly from the closer, aimed shots as the battle progressed and the enemy neared. Arrows were not unlimited, so archers and their commanders took every effort to ration their use to the situation at hand. Nonetheless, resupply during battle was available. Young boys were often employed to run additional arrows to longbow archers while in their positions on the battlefield."

Harry had the grace to smirk. "Whereas a musket, even a fairly advanced 18th century version using a paper cartridge (which vastly sped up the whole loading process), was lucky to get a fire rate of four rounds a minute even with a veteran soldier allowed to fire as quickly as he was able - three or less a minute for a very experienced man without a paper cartridge. In combat one or two per minute was far more likely. And muskets were so inaccurate it was complained that it took a man's weight in lead balls to kill him. They basically gave up on the concept of marksmanship and relied entirely on massive volume of fire at short range. They commonly exchanged volleys at sixty feet or less because it was so ineffective farther out. In fact I recall one saying 'It is a very unfortunate soldier indeed who is hit by a musket at a hundred feet - provided it was aimed at him.' The musket was theoretically their main weapon, but those armies did most of their killing with bayonets. One British general was nicknamed 'No Flint' Grey because he rarely had his troops fire. He just ordered bayonet charges. Can you imagine a tank general today ordering his units not to fire, just run the enemy over?"

Hermione gazed at him triumphantly as she stood up to replace her book on the shelves. "And I was just reading, archery contests such as the famous one where Robin Hood shot, commonly had their targets 'seven score and ten yards' out, or four hundred and fifty feet or farther. And the main tactic for infantry attacks for musket equipped armies was a slow measured advance. Even at a fast walk, which was as fast as those formations could go without charging (at which point they become melee troops and don't shoot a thing), they only cross about 210 feet a minute. So a handful of decent archers, not even the best, just enough to pass military standards, could over the two minutes of that advance, kill more than twenty times their number in musketeers before the muskets even came close enough to fire."

Harry smiled back to her. "So, if you had, say, five of those longbow archers. They could kill a hundred musketeers before the archers were in any danger - and even have time for spare shots in case they missed a couple times. You know, those kind of losses are demoralizing. It's hard to make your troops take those and go on fighting. Historically speaking, virtually all armies break and run BEFORE losing one man in ten! And it looks bad if you have to have a thousand troops to chase down five. But musket equipped armies defined the 'stand there and take it' mentality. So they couldn't even duck for cover."

The girl nodded firmly. "Longbow archers were the elite troops of a medieval battlefield. Blackpowder firearms took over because they were cheap, and you could hand any moron one and get him to use it within minutes. Archery training took decades to get the kind of skill they required."

Harry snorted good-naturedly. "I'd recommend cavalry charges, personally."

Hermione sniffed disdainfully. "The French tried it. English longbowmen would commonly jab hundreds of stakes as big as a spear into the ground and fight from within those hedges. Charging them on horseback was suicide. It wasn't until Joan of Arc got the proud French knights to dismount and enter those hedges on foot that they ever beat them. And even so it wasn't easy - it just was no

longer impossible. England dominated Europe with the longbow, and they enjoyed that so much at one point they'd cut down every yew tree in Britain, and most of those on the continent, to make bows."

Harry sighed, then chortled good-naturedly. "Which reminds me, don't forget we've got another archery lesson in a few minutes. Firenze is trying to make up for having missed a few days in the transition of the forest."

Hermione groaned. Her arms hurt, and her poor fingers could barely hold a quill! Firenze was turning out to be as much of a fanatic about his sport as Oliver Wood was about Quidditch!

Suddenly Harry's complaints the last two years about an insane coach wanting to practice them at all hours, in all weathers, and work his team to exhaustion were not so funny. It wasn't a little boy being lazy, it was a real inconvenience! (not to mention a literal pain)

Sighing, she got up to follow him out to their favorite apparation spot, where they met up with the others, and Harry took them all to the Forest.

But instead of Firenze it was Trelawney who was there, sitting at a tea table set for six and calmly sipping her juice. Then she looked up at them with an intellectually smug smile that was so Hermione Harry had to check to make sure the real Granger still stood by his side.

Ever since the professor had taken that polyjuice he'd been able to tell her apart from the real girl until right then, and it scared him.

Instead the professor turned back to her drink and, blowing on the cider to cool it (for her change had made tea revolting to her, no one knew why) she calmly gloated, "Ever since the Headbastard's manipulations to my mind have been removed I've been able to recall my own predictions, when I make any. And I just had a rather detailed, though brief, one."

"I can see why he wouldn't want you to be able to do that," the real Hermione volunteered. "Oracles may not be able to predict their own

futures, but you still might have seen something that could mess him up."

Harry had not spoken. He'd had a sinking feeling ever since Sybil spoke that this was about to become one of those, "Troy will not fall unless..." moments and he was bracing for the impact.

Greeks had relied upon their oracles for clear and accurate predictions, none of this "you'll never understand it until it's all over" nonsense!

It turned out he was exactly right.

Trelawney turned a strong gaze to them with just a touch of fairy fire around her eyes, which was a touch spooky considering that she wore Hermione's face. "Headmaster Dumbledore has split his soul into thirteen parts. Three of those are shortly to be embodied and will walk free. They are untouched by the venom you used so adroitly to destroy the original, and if they have time to get their bearings you must unavoidably be destroyed. So if you wish to live and succeed at the tasks the Fairy Queen has given you, you must catch as many as you can as they emerge before they have sufficient guard up."

Harry's heart sunk at the thought of Dumbledore having twelve horcruxes. Nevertheless, he asked, "Where do they come from?"

The oracle's gaze riveted onto him. "Thirteen strongholds he has, Hogwarts plus twelve others. None are what they seem. The first is a hill, farmed for generations. You will know it by the purple windmill. Second is a bar owned by his brother. It is most dangerous of all. Third you will never find unless one who knows shows you the way."

Harry was nodding, already tabulating and calculating the information. There were no purple windmills on any of his farm properties, so it was time to take a broom ride over some others. Fortunately only wizards would have a purple windmill. Best to start looking across other farms Dumbledore controlled.

Second was the clearest of all. The Hog's Head Inn at Hogsmead was run by Aberforth Dumbledore, Albus' younger and only brother.

Third obviously indicated a property under Fidelius. But they were fairy, they had the second sight! They could see through those!

Then Harry's heart sunk yet again as Voldemort's knowledge popped up with the answer: an anti-fairy ward. Rare. Heck, practically unknown! One effect of having an anti-fairy ward was that house elves could not enter. So it was simply unthinkable to any pureblood household to apply one, as the thought of living without servants catering to your every need was appalling. Pampered purebloods simply could not tolerate a life of not being catered to. And none of the poorer households would want them either, for that and the fact that it would prevent them from using their most popular Christmas decorations.

No, to wizards that would be almost as unthinkable as having a ward against functioning toilets (which reminded him to suggest that to the twins as a prank). But on an old, unused, semi-abandoned property? Yeah, he could see that. Then a chill seized his heart. The Dumbledores were an ancient family. They might have properties anywhere, including especially some of those old quiet backwater part-magical towns he'd been converting over into forts!

So any one of them might be compromised. Even though he wasn't planning on hiding in any of those places himself the thought was chilling. "Who is one who knows?"

"Bathilda Bagshot knows enough," Sybil's reply was unusually blunt for an oracle. "The ones who truly know would never tell you. They are bound to never tell at all."

Harry sighed, nodding, while all his girls look on at him processing this. "So we need her on our side, great. Well at least we know."

"What traps would work best?" Hermione blurted from around Harry's shoulder.

Sybil grinned. It was a good question. "Whatever you do, back it up with dementors."

Harry slapped his face and proclaimed, "I am a FOOL! We KNOW the old man is using a horcrux, or as it turns out, a dozen horcruxes. Those are soul anchors, meaning bits of soul. And what creature eats those?"

"Dementors," the girls all realized together.

"Of course!" Luna gasped. "We've been going about this all wrong! There is no reason for horcruxes to be indestructible. They are made of dementor food! All of the protections are simply things that wizards apply after the fact to protect their precious soul anchors!"

Harry rolled his eyes and tossed his hands in the air, frustrated over his own foolishness. "A horcrux can stop you from crossing over to true death, but can only draw you back to life if you are a free-floating spirit. If you're stuck in a dementor's gut there's nothing that it can do! Every part of a dark lord's soul we shove down a dementor's throat is one piece that cannot come back, no matter what! I've even been DOING that to Tom's soul pieces! Why did it never occur to me to do it to Dumbledore? This could have been over with by now!"

Luna laid a small hand on his shoulder, speaking with kind eyes. "Harry, don't blame yourself for not having all the best ideas at once. No one can do that."

Now Hermione herself smirked. "Actually, I think we ought to go for double protection: Every dementor we feed a part of one of their souls we should send through the Veil of Death."

They all paused.

"Let's do that to most of them right now," Hannah remarked. "It's not like anyone wants to have them around."

"Yeah," Susan offered. "From what you said couldn't Voldemort get them back on his side in an instant? Didn't the Headbastard say he was bringing him back? Do we want them to still be around for him to recruit?"

"I'll tell Narcissa to get the Ministry on it," Luna volunteered. "It's not like any of us can control them. Harry couldn't use the same dark arts Riddle did to get command of the things."

"Save out a few," Harry instructed tiredly. "We have a few traps to set."

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Author's Notes:

You know, I played up the drama of the need to get Trelawney out from under Dumbledore's control so long ago for a reason, and that was with perfect information he was unbeatable.

Having an oracle on their side doesn't make them unbeatable, but it sure is nice to have perfectly accurate targeting information from time to time.

Chapter Sixty-Five
by Lionheart

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After a mostly sleepless night for all of them, when the group reformed Harry went and confronted Luna immediately. "Luna, I know you said to wait. But with the threats placed against us I feel we need Bella back immediately. We're just too outgunned and need all the help we can get. Frankly I'm certain that I'm going to have to summon the rest of the Death Eaters and proclaim myself Voldemort the Second just to get some experienced fighting units on our side to even the odds a bit. But even that would be easier to do if I had Bellatrix by my side, so we need her right away. I'm sorry."

This proclamation was met by a soft yet bright smile by the blonde. "Don't be sorry, Harry. Today is the day. We've waited long enough, and you can have her back now. Take me to Trelawney's glade and I'll show you."

Somewhat puzzled, travel arrangements were taken care of and they arrived to see a large, full-length mirror leaned up against Trelawney's oak. When Luna stepped up to it Alice of Wonderland came out, deposited a familiar golden vial in her hands, and vanished without speaking back into the mirror.

Luna nodded to Trelawney and the dryad dumped the acorns and other nuts out of the now completed Cauldron of Plenty just as dawn arose.

Harry and Hermione were staring in disbelief at the familiar vial as Luna faced the rest of them and explained, "One month ago, when we were doing that one day of intense time-traveling, I rushed ahead to the place where Trelawney would become a dryad, and getting there before anyone else, I stole her potion before Harry arrived and she could take it."

"But WHY?" Susan blurted.

"Always people ask the hardest question!" Luna smiled aside to Hermione. "Anyway, then I gave it to my Grandmother Alice to take to Wonderland, where time works very strangely indeed. I got her to promise to give it back to me precisely one month from the time I gave it to her for safekeeping. I would then keep it one hour, and return it to her. She was then to take it back to me one month ago, so I could replace it by the pond in time for Harry to find it and for Sybil to become a dryad."

Harry's eyes had crossed, but he bravely surmised. "If I am following this, what you did was to take the potion, move it forward a month, then back a month again to where we found it in order for us to use it as we did. Why?"

Luna's eyes shone brilliant, pleased with her own scheming. She held her head high and said, "This way I could run it through the Cauldron of Plenty! And we would have a hundred doses of that potion, instead of just one! So a hundred dryads to serve Harry rather than only one!"

Jaws dropped all around.

"So truly, it doesn't matter what damage was done to Bellatrix' body," Luna calmly uncorked the dryad cordial and poured it into the Cauldron of Plenty before picking up a stirring spoon and turned a dazzling smile on the rest of them. "Because she is about to get a new one! One without all of the marks and scars, mental or magical, of having served her Dark Lord!"

Harry gasped at the thought of one hundred witches basically unkillable by normal means. Even if they were untrained to start with, they could be taught, and that was quite a fighting force Luna had just delivered him!

"Then, all those enhancement potions..!" Hermione's eyes widened in wonder.

"Exactly!" Luna hopped up and down in place triumphantly holding her spoon. "Applied to this potion is the same as applied to the seed! We can dose all our dryads with plant augmentations in the same dose that MAKES them dryads!"

Hermione's eyes began to grow larger and larger as she ran through the catalog of plant enhancements aloud, "The fire protection ritual makes them immune to heat and flame, at least to those who it gets applied to..."

"But we can finish doing that to them all next year, after the first Summer Solstice," Luna interrupted.

Hermione nodded, already going on, "The potion of plant protection makes them immune to harmful insects. The Essence of Evergreen prevents them from suffering when it gets too cold. The potion brewed from Elixir of Life makes them immune to rot and corrosion, while the one brewed with phoenix tears protects them from poison and disease." Here her face scrunched up, "But why the one for making them continually fruit and blossom?"

Luna was too happy to answer smugly, so it came out cheerful instead as she hopped around in glee, "Because Harry's family controls farm interests, of course! Production is wealth, and wealth is power. We've zinged Dumbledore enough times on that issue you ought to know that! Besides, a major concern for agriculture is keeping food harvested once a year fresh for sale during the entire year as people buy and consume it. Having trees that continually provide fruit all year round gets around that!"

Harry was nodding. "As do those enchantments of Alcinous, where the fruit does not fall or spoil, but remains fresh all year round."

"Exactly!" Luna bounced up and down, unable to contain her glee.

Concern resolved, Hermione continued her mental count aloud, "That potion Harry converted from his family's patent application for that ribbon makes them immune to bad weather. Then his family's Everfertile Soil recipe that enables them to live on any ground, no matter how barren..." She raised her face to the others, having gone over her facts until she'd figured it out. "All of these put together using a Draught of Draughts makes it so the dryads this produces will be all but immune to every form of natural harm!"

"And a dryad lives as long as her tree does," Susan repeated in awe. "That means making their trees impervious to virtually every form of nonmagical harm..."

"Will lead to practically unkillable dryads," Luna confirmed smugly. "Wood boring beetles, blight, bad weather, especially cold winters, running out of nutrients in the soil, none of these are of any concern to OUR dryads!"

Harry cocked his head to consider her. "So their only concern is lumberjacks and other direct acts of men and wizards."

"Which is why I approached the twins for a conversion for re'em blood to use on plants." Luna raised her nose in mock-snootiness.

Harry laughed. Seeing the questioning faces of his two Hufflepuffs (who had good excuse for not knowing, as this material was not yet covered in class), he wiped aside his tears and explained, "Re'ems are magical golden bulls, and drinking their blood imparts great strength - for a short while. But we've already seen other temporary potions like polyjuice and unctuous unction get turned permanent as part of a dryad's transformation. So, while it won't make them quite as strong as giants, I'd say it ought to make these delicate seeming, beautiful wood nymphs as strong as trolls."

"And trolls are plenty strong enough to discourage all but the most powerful woodcutters," Hermione concluded softly, fighting a grin of her own.

"And since she could automatically feel any harm to any part of her tree, and can flash to one no matter the distance..." Luna giggled.

"The first bite of the axe is also going to be the woodchopper's last," Harry concluded, nodding firmly as he agreed with the principle. You protect your people from harm so they can later be around to protect you.

Elementary strategy.

Hermione giggled, bending over to cover her face lest she laugh out loud. "And all of those potions we accumulated that are totally irresponsible to use on only a single plant, because they are so terribly NOT cost-effective!"

"Now we have a hundred plants protected from each, instead of one, because they all got blended in the Cauldron of Plenty," Luna agreed, nodding.

"Oh, but it's so much more than that!" Hermione insisted, still fighting giggles. "We're going to be taking cuttings from all of these trees! We'll have entire FORESTS protected for the cost of one potion blended this way!"

"But..! Who are we even going to use it on?" Hannah blurted, then shrank as gazes moved to her. "Don't look at me! My mother would kill me if I couldn't give her grandkids without a planting box!"

"Same here!" Susan quickly asserted.

"It wouldn't seem fair to use it on people whose lives are just starting out," Hermione hedged. "This is a rather permanent change, after all, and most of us students are kids. It doesn't seem right to take that away."

Harry began grinning. "So you're saying that the best way to use this is as a second chance for people whose lives are already messed up?"

Hermione blinked, considering that. "I guess that does seem best."

"Good." Harry nodded firmly, crossing his arms. "Then I nominate the female staff members of Hogwarts."

Once more jaws dropped all around.

Harry made a gesture to emphasize his point. "Technically they are agents of our enemy. Right now they all contribute substantially to his power, and I'd rather turn them into friends than destroy them. Plus for all we know this potion only works on females, and I'd rather not

waste a dose finding out if it works on men. Besides, that's just creepy anyway. But I see this as a rescue. The staff of Hogwarts have all been routinely Obliviated of deeds and things the Headmaster would rather they not know, so most of them are already messed up. Plus, he passes around Compulsion charms more than he does lemon drops in order to get the environment just the way he likes it, with teachers ignoring all of the bullying and so on that goes on around here. I looked into this a bit right after we rescued Trelawney, and most of the staff have had their minds damaged by all of the manipulating he's done to them over the years."

Hermione had begun nodding. "The obliterating of McGonagall seems to have been a biweekly occurrence, according to Dumbledore's appointment book. So not only do they follow our enemy, he isn't treating them right. This both robs him of power, and sees to it they receive better care." She considered another moment, then sighed, "Plus our Queen told us Hogwarts is one of his irreplaceable treasures. This damages his ability to use that."

Susan threw in her two cents, "I agree we should get the female Hogwarts staff with this. I know from my aunt's complaints the more insiders you get on your side, the harder it will be for anyone else to control things. She's had to fight against established power blocks for years, and it's miserable. So if we get half of the teachers in this castle on our side, it will be harder for Dumbledore to control the school or do things we don't like or approve of. They can simply ignore his instructions and policies, if nothing else. Snape has been getting away with it for years. How is he going to discipline them?"

Hermione considered her friend carefully, before adding. "Many are elderly, but if you want to recruit people with skills you'd best aim for those who've had time to acquire them."

Luna instantly began bouncing up and down, clapping her hands. "Harry, you don't get older than ghosts! If Nearly Headless Nick could be administered Mandrake Restorative Draught in our second year to recover from being petrified by a basilisk, does that mean ALL ghosts could be given potions?"

They all met eyes.

"I don't see why not," Hermione answered in amazed and wondering tones.

"And if Myrtle, then the Grey Lady," Luna commanded in soft and playful tones. "She's been hiding out in odd corners of Ravenclaw Tower, afraid of being exorcised."

"I'll have to research it," the boy replied. "And one of the first things I'd like to do is snag Poppy Pomphrey, who supposedly did it the first time. She's bound to know if there are any tricks involved, and having a healer on our side just smacks of all kinds of rightness. Plus, if we can really steal half of the Headmaster's staff out from under his nose, I'd like to try it."

He then rubbed the side of his neck in nervousness. "Plus, I'm really not comfortable with our health being seen to by an agent of our enemy any longer than it has to be."

Hermione scrunched up her face. "As an employee of Hogwarts, she reports to Dumbledore and takes orders from him, and we really don't know what he could've done to subvert her."

The two Hufflepuffs paled, not having thought of that.

"There has to be some limits, or I would've died on my first night in there," Harry sighed, shaking his head.

"Yes, but is it you who are protected, or all of us?" Hermione questioned.

The boy nodded. "You're right. We can hardly take the risk."

"I've got one more candidate."

They all turned to Luna. "Who?"

"Narcissa," she told them simply, with a slight scowl on her face.

The others heaved an immediate sigh, and Harry nodded.

Narcissa had proven herself useful a dozen times over in the political arena and the court of public opinion. Having stood by Lucius' side while he enacted his clever dance had taught her all of the steps, and she proved to be far more popular, only in part because she served a far less odious agenda.

However, she'd also proven traitorous, building up her own power base at the expense of her Luna and Harry's. It was subtle, she hadn't gone far yet, but her intentions were clear.

Luckily, Harry knew how to read minds better than she could defend hers, so it was a simple matter to pluck those plans out of her head at one of her debriefings.

That betrayal made Narcissa useless to them for the only thing they'd had a use for her to begin with. She could NOT be their agent in politics if she would serve her own interests instead of theirs! Nor could they trust such a person to wield their authority on their behalf, not when she obviously wouldn't. So despite how much they needed an agent, it couldn't be her.

Not while she was like this.

The question then became: what to do with her? Luna's answer came just as fast: turn her into a dryad. With that cordial making an unctuous unction permanent in her system, like it had for Trelawney, they'd no longer have to worry about her loyalties.

She would serve them as one fairy to the Queen's Champions, if nothing else. But with a permanent dose of unctuous unction in her system, she'd like it.

Nor, for that matter, would they have to be concerned about their agent getting assassinated. That was always a danger in Pureblood politics, you do something someone doesn't like and they might lodge a fatal objection. But, no longer having to fear that, she could be much more bold in her actions.

One of Narcissa's more minor betrayals had been to divert family funds to pay for a cocktail of potions to give to Draca. Apparently a mother's loyalty to her child was not yet exhausted, because when Draca had sent her mother a letter from Azkaban asking for certain potions to be prepared, the ones to enable her to fulfill her breeding contract quickly and easily, Narcissa had embezzled the funds to pay for it.

Never mind that, had she made the request, she might even have convinced them to part with the funds. A few of them had had second thoughts about what they'd done to Draco (Notably Harry, as the form that punishment took made him nervous every time he stood up to pee. Hermione felt it was just punishment enough, as it wasn't too different from what Draco would've done to her. But Luna, whom the little bastard had tried to kill, was often of the opinion that they hadn't punished him enough).

Still, Narcissa had stolen the money from them instead of asked. That was, sadly, only a minor one out of her several betrayals. She was clearly and unmistakably setting herself up as an independent power, and that was only confirmed by what Harry had read in her mind.

"Alright," Hermione nodded, having thought this through thoroughly along with the rest. "So we turn Narcissa into a dryad."

Then Susan blurted out, "Harry! I'm glad we've chosen out a couple, but we don't have TIME to choose out a hundred women like this!"

"To say nothing of kidnapping them," Hermione murmured, recalling her one experience in that department. That was hard work!

"The debates would take forever," Susan concluded, shaking her head. "I've been with my aunt to a few Wizengamot meetings, and disagreements will happen. It could literally tie us up for years, just discussing who to change!"

"We don't even know that many women," Hannah agreed.

Harry drew in a big breath, then sighed. "Ok then, this is how we'll do it. We'll select twenty women to be dryads. Then, once they've made

the change, we give each of them the duty to choose four more suitable girls apiece for us."

Hermione frowned. It was a good idea, but... "Harry, even twenty could take a long time. Do you recall how long it took us to kidnap Trelawney? We could be the better part of a month doing this - and that is if nothing goes wrong!"

Once more Harry sighed. "Okay, you're right. So how about this: we restore Bella, then have HER kidnap McGonagall. She's already proven expert at not only infiltrating Hogwarts but capturing and replacing the staff. So we trust her to do that again. Then once we have McGonagall we have her call together the rest of the female staff, get them out of the castle and changed. That's ten right there, plus Myrtle, the Grey Lady, Bellatrix and Narcissa. If we can find six more we've got our twenty. Then we rely on them to choose the rest."

Luna nodded, firmly agreeing with this plan. "Bathilda Bagshot for another of our original twenty. According to Trelawney we need her help, so this way, transforming her into a dryad, we can be sure to get it."

"McGonagall could also be made to sign more forms authorizing more schools and other such concessions if she was our dryad." Hermione mused. Then she turned to face her favorite blonde Ravenclaw. "Luna, it occurs to me that we can create more copies of Sybil's oak using cuttings, and that she can't die so long as one of those trees or any of their offspring exist. It also occurs to me that you have access to Wonderland and Oz. I wonder if they might not be good places to plant trees."

It was rare to see Luna astonished, yet as her eyes flew wide the other girls giggled and Harry smiled.

This was, needless to say, a positively brilliant idea.

Susan was shaking her head. "I'm amazed. Do you really think we can put Myrtle and the Grey Lady through the dryad conversion process?"

"We're going to try," Harry informed her soberly. "In fact, let's get this potion mixed, because one of the powers of the stone in Slytherin's Ring is you can turn it three times and cause the dead to appear before you. Most of the time they resent being pulled out of Heaven, but I want to try it on a ghost, someone who has not crossed over. And if that works, then we can get two of our dryad candidates to appear before us right now."

They immediately turned to the Cauldron of Plenty. The Draught of Draughts Luna had ordered made everything easy. It was as simple as pouring all of them into the pot, which was soon bubbling with a hundred times the doses of their combined concoction.

A pity the Cauldron could be used to only multiply something once. There was no way to add something more to get another hundred copies of a brew or they could have had a theoretically limitless supply.

But such was not to be. However, apparently they weren't done mixing this one. Hermione caught Luna as she poured in the pale pink contents of a vial no one had agreed on. "What's that?" Bushy hair stood on end as she recognized the color. "Is it a love potion?"

"No, not actually." Luna shook her head, speaking conversationally as she poured the potion into the mix. "This is a potion called Bride's Delight, made about a hundred years ago to make it easier on pureblooded women to accept their arranged marriages. You can key it like a love potion, putting in one of the groom's hairs, or just wait for the wedding night, that serves as well; but it only renders her more sensitive to being attracted to or stimulated by her husband, making it easier for her to feel those feelings towards her groom and magnifying them when they occurred, based on the theory that the more excited a woman gets, the easier it is for her to become pregnant."

Luna capped the now empty potion bottle and stood back to contemplate the bubbling mixture, never taking her eyes off the cauldron as she continued to explain, "It worked quite well by all reports, and enjoyed a few decades of great popularity, but it fell out of favor when pureblooded men got disgusted by their wives being

randy sex kittens - no matter how easily satisfied. They searched for another solution, and that's when having muggleborn women serve as substitute mothers came into fashion. After that wives stopped taking the potion, because all that attraction got unfulfilled and just led to greater frustration over their uninterested husbands, who'd begun to explore one of the worse legacies of the ancient Greeks: the philosophy that a woman was for duty, boys for pleasure, and goats for ecstasy. Only our Purebloods took that as a starting point and have been getting ever more exotic and bizarre in their sexual habits ever since - a trend that had begun before Bride's Delight got developed, and which it was hoped it might fix."

Capping the bottle, Luna turned to look at her friends. "But since Draca was going to have to 'do the deed' with Crabbe and Goyle, her mother got her a dose to make things easier on her."

Hermione's hair was standing on end, and her fists were clenched and she towered over the distracted blonde. "What on Earth were you THINKING adding something like THAT to our dryad cordial!?!"

Luna smiled serenely as she pocketed the empty vial. "Oh? Well it occurred to me that while having a hundred dryads was good, more was always better. So if they felt, uhm," she delicately licked her lips, averting her eyes, "eager I guess would be the best word, to find a husband, then an otherwise static population could see some rapid growth. After all, our ultimate task is to save the fairies from extinction, and dryads are one of the races of fairy."

Paralyzed by this thought, Hermione made no objection when Luna uncapped the other vial Narcissa had paid for and dumped that into the cauldron with a satisfied smirk. "There! Now in nine years or so we ought to go from having one hundred dryads to having two thousand five hundred or so. To be fair, even if all of our dryads find husbands at once, it will be twenty years before the youngest reach eleven. So in all probability this will have no effect on our current war. But we still need to plan for our future."

The other girls did some quick calculations in their heads. One hundred dryads given the same potion Draca had planned to use to pop out twenty four children in nine years... yup, twenty four babies

each over one hundred dryads would be two and a half thousand dryads!

They all blushed furiously.

"They..." Hermione gulped, face a new shade of red. "They won't keep getting pregnant with twins four times every three years, will they?"

Luna calmly shook her head. "No, unlike some potions this one doesn't have a duration that can be extended like that. It's good for twelve sets of twins only. After those nine years our wood nymphs will go back to a more normal rate. But considering for dryads a normal rate of reproduction is one baby dryad every couple of hundred years, and there are so few dryads right now, I think we really need them to have a population boost to start with."

"Well... that's logical... I suppose," Hermione whispered that last part.

Luna turned away, already happily wondering out loud, "Now, all we need is a couple more of these potions to brew into hundreds to give our House Elves. And maybe our centaurs. Hmm, the unicorns could also use a boost..."

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Author's Notes:

I love grabbing elements that people have already forgotten and suddenly combining them together into a major change in the balance of power!

I'd introduced the Cauldron of Plenty, and even explained what it does. I'd given them a dryad cordial for Trelawney, and I'd even had that obscure reference in the conversation Luna had with her Grandmother Alice about taking things forward and back a month. You just never noticed my evil plan was building all this time! Not even after I gave you a reminder/hint in all of the plant protection potions that Luna was collecting!

Face it, you'd dismissed them all as yet more extraneous details! Yet here I have forged out of them a substantial power block, seemingly out of nowhere! Yet every part carefully detailed before in ways you hadn't noticed.

Maybe now you'll pay attention when I give you details like that, so I don't get bombarded by people who'd skimmed portions asking questions I'd already answered, in detail, chapters ago (like that horcruxes are more like wands than like potions, in that they are NOT used up when used).

You know, most of this story is along the theme of: Wow! You know, this object (horcrux, sneakoscope, foe glass, whatever) has so much unused potential! I wonder what it would be like to actually take that and project it forward to its logical end. Where would that take us?

So a Dark Lord who USES horcruxes to their logical limits. A town that USES those Dark Arts detectors to maximize their capabilities against the very threats we are told the wizarding world faces! A paper laden with all of the mind control magic AVAILABLE in the series! People who actually USE the stuff they are given in a sane and rational fashion!

So much better than letting all that unrealized potential lie around.

Even stuff you'd winced at and done your best to forget as quickly as possible, like Draca's plans for getting out of her breeding contract quickly, suddenly come back and produce a major change to the balance of power.

YES! I LIVE for moments like those! Well, maybe not live for them, but I do like them a very great deal. It is a feeling like no others, to suddenly whiplash my readers around to something they had never considered, but was building all this time.

And you just can't do it without laying in a lot of detail ahead of time.

Chapter Sixty-Six
by Lionheart

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Minerva McGonagall sat in her place as the staff gathered around her for the meeting she had called. "Thank you all for coming," she told them as the last of them, Rolanda Hooch and Pomona Sprout, took their seats. "Filius and Mr. Lupin are out on hall support so our students do not get too out of hand while we have our meeting, but I felt a quick, informal brunch while we discuss where we are as a school to be appropriate considering recent calamities."

The Deputy Headmistress looked kindly around the room. For all the talk of Hogwarts having an equal female to male staff ratio, that was not what she was seeing in this room. To her right sat Aurora Sinistra, Professor of Astronomy. Next to her was Bathsheba Babbling of Ancient Runes. While on her left sat Pomona Sprout, Head of Hufflepuff and Herbology Professor, with Septima Vector, their Arithmancy Professor, and Charity Burbage of Muggle Studies next to her, with Rolanda Xiomara Hooch directly across.

Hagrid was out seeing to the grounds (and the poor man was still blubbering over the Forbidden Forest going missing one night). But neither the school nurse, Poppy Pomphrey, nor their now well-esteemed librarian Irma Pince were present either.

With Snape and Filch no longer on staff, and Binns exorcised, everyone was now accounted for.

These present, plus Trelawney (who was first to be changed) their nurse and librarian made for ten female staff members. While the male side currently was represented only by Dumbledore, Hagrid, Lupin and Flitwick.

So much for the school being equally divided along gender lines.

She signaled Harry, and he came forward with a food cart and began to serve dishes to all of the ladies present. While he did so, McGonagall smirked. "Mr Potter I have found to be an excellent cook,

and in absence of most of our house elves I have him serving out a detention providing refreshments for us. Do not be afraid to speak before him, as he is wearing a silencing charm for this occasion so he does not overhear sensitive issues."

Harry kept his head down and served quietly and efficiently as the female staff of Hogwarts began to speak frankly before him. He did wear a silencing charm, but it was only on his mouth and below. His ears were fine, and he listened without showing a sign on his face while he served out drinks and dishes to the women present.

Bellatrix was doing a fine job as McGonagall, he felt.

Actually, though they had kidnapped the Deputy Headmistress from her room that morning and subjected her to the unctuous unction and dryad cordial (she made a very excellent birch, and they had all enjoyed watching her transformation) they had a change of plans that no one had been able to tell Harry about, because he'd been too busy cooking in the kitchen, and that was really Professor McGonagall there.

Bellatrix was currently impersonating Rolanda Hooch, and she was running damage control for in case anything went wrong. If things did go sour, they would all be looking at McGonagall, giving Bella freedom to curse them in the backs. And if things went right, it was her intention to go and collect Poppy Pomphrey immediately after this meeting with tales of a flying injury, so they could get virtually all of the female staff at once.

Sybil Trelawney showed up, astonishing everyone (including Harry). Once again this was a change in plans, but this one was actually a change of a change of plans. Originally Hermione suggested that she could attend as Trelawney, since she'd mastered her form during that first switch long ago. But Trelawney begged and pleaded that someone go fetch her old hairbrush that she'd used during her mortal days, so she could take a hair from it and charge polyjuice to assume her old form.

This was not because she liked her old appearance, far from it, and she still intended to go about looking like Hermione whenever

possible. But for this once she wanted to be there doing what Bellatrix was doing - supporting Harry. And since this might be one of the last opportunities with Albus gone the girls hadn't the heart to refuse, so they let her.

She too, was there with the same plans as Bellatrix. If anything went wrong she was not the person they'd all be looking at, and could stun them in the backs. And if things went right, she could rush off to grab Irma Pince to add to the collective flood of teachers about to be converted.

Certain levels of function had to be maintained around the school at all times, so very few staff meetings actually involved all of the staff. But with no idea when any of the Albus clones were returning, they did want to grab as many teachers as possible as soon as possible to avoid confrontations. So, nodding to the rest of the staff, Sybil took her seat.

Besides, she'd 'seen' what this turned into, and it was too amusing to miss!

While there was some flutter over the reappearance of their Divination teacher, Sybil just gave her best mysterious smile and told them all would be revealed shortly.

There was naturally some grumbling over this proclamation from the fraud.

Harry hid his smile as he served everyone their drinks of choice, each one laced with unctuous unction. The plan was once they'd all drunk enough to be his best friends, then McGonagall would lead them out of the small room and off the grounds to where they could take a portkey to just outside the glade.

One great hiccup they'd discovered during Bellatrix' transformation that was later confirmed by McGonagall's, was that dryads are invariably YOUNG, and BEAUTIFUL women, meaning that a lady's dryad form often looked very much like an idealized version of what she was when she was young and in her prime. Age lines, wrinkles and scars vanished. They were neither over nor underweight after the

change, nor did they acquire any of the gawkiness or pimples of youth. In short, they'd never looked so good, even when they were that young. Naturally this endlessly pleased the women so changed, but also just as obviously they couldn't go around like that and be taken for their mortal selves. And that would invalidate their plans to use them as sleeper agents to confound Dumbledore's control of the school. So Luna was out collecting samples from hair brushes to use in polyjuice so their new dryads could learn to impersonate themselves.

Apparently a certain amount of metamorph talent was inherent in being a dryad. And while they preferred to be their own beautiful selves, they could disguise themselves as other women at need.

And, well, that could be useful.

"Before we start," Pomona Spout leaned forward, eyes twinkling. "Are you going to share with us the good news?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," McGonagall said primly, fighting a grin.

"Oh, don't you take that tone with me, young lady!" Pomona teased her friend indulgently. "You and I got hired on practically the same day. We went to school together. I know your secrets, and I haven't seen you in a mood like this one since you had a crush in our seventh year. So spill!"

Other females perked up, sensing gossip.

McGonagall could now no longer entirely fight her canary-eating grin. Blushing, she looked down at the table. "I... may have some romantic prospect, yes."

The entire table was now riveted at the shocking news.

Pomona shook her head as if regretfully, sporting her own grin. "Dear, you know we can't possibly let you leave this table now without prying all of your secrets from you!"

She was surrounded by nodding women.

"Are you using a new makeup?" Aurora blurted. As soon as she did so all the others at the table noticed and remarked upon it, how Minerva's face was remarkably clear. Really, Harry, who was still in the room, couldn't tell the difference, but women notice these things.

It was at that point that McGonagall lost control under the pressure, her transformation falling away to reveal her true form.

She got surrounded by gasps.

Pomona sighed, then scolded, "Minnie! I'm surprised at you! You know deaging potions and beautifying elixirs are not something to use in a relationship! They are just a form of lying! It always ends up worse when you use them, as they always end up discovering the truth eventually!"

Minerva raised her head to regard the disappointed women surrounding her, a triumphal smile on her face. "That's just the thing," she boasted. "This is no lie. The effects are real and permanent."

Once more gasps filled the chamber. Then suddenly everyone had to get out of their seats to examine her. Minerva's hair was a bright red, as it had been in her youth before she'd turned steel gray. Her body was round in the right places and lithe and had to be commented upon, and her skin was absolutely to die for, soft and smooth and blemishless; her proportions flawless.

She was, in essence, one ideal of feminine beauty, the ideal that fit her body type and coloration. She could not have looked better and still been herself.

"Now I simply can't believe it!" Pomona declared. "If this sort of thing was available they could charge my weight in gold just for a spot on the sign-up sheet! Now Minnie, be honest. What have you done?"

"Me?" Minerva fluttered her eyes in fake astonishment. "Why should any of you think this was my fault? In point of fact, I was kidnapped this morning by Bellatrix Black, who took me off to a clearing where I

was forced to consume a fairy draught that will not only keep me looking this good for the rest of my life, but will make me arguably as hard to kill as Voldemort himself!"

"Now even I know you're lying," Aurora, the youngest witch in their company, reproved. Fairies, in theory, had the power to do that sort of thing. But they were too capricious to be relied upon to actually do it! It had been positively ages since anyone had convinced one to try. They were far more likely to leave one an ugly toad and consider the whole thing a joke.

Besides, adding Bellatrix Black to it just made the story too ridiculous.

"Very well, I'll prove it to you," Minerva shoved back her chair and stood up. "They have more doses of this lying about. I'm sure I could convince them to share some with you. I do warn you, however. They will expect you to take a draught of unctuous unction before they will give any to you."

"If they make me look like that they won't need a dose of unctuous unction to make me their best friend." Pomona also stood, and poking her friend in the ribs to get her moving, demanded, "Now lead the way! But I warn you, if this is a joke you'll have all year to regret it!"

"Of course," Minerva nodded demurely, before turning to younger teachers and commanding, "Septima, Bathsheba, you put warming charms on the food for when we return. Sybil, you go collect Irma. Rolanda, you get Poppy. They won't want to be left out of this."

"I don't have a girl in my house who'll want to be left out of this, provided this is true," Pomona insisted. "There won't be a girl in the school! Or in our world, for that matter! Which is why I think you have to be fibbing."

"Just us teachers, for now," Minerva returned with a smile. "And you'll learn for yourself soon enough whether I am lying or not."

Sybil left in a rush, biting her finger to avoid laughing. She was weeping tears from her eyes out of the strain of not having busted up in the chamber!

Harry was gobsmacked. This was not what they'd planned! Not even close! But moments later the entire flock of them were going willingly to where he'd thought he'd have to drag them.

Beauty is IMPORTANT to women! And he'd failed to adequately grasp that.

Pomona took the first drink of cordial herself, leaving all the rest to witness her transformation in shock and wonder, then practically fight over who got to go next after she'd exited the trunk of her new tree as a young and beautiful woman - far better looking than she'd ever been in mortality.

Far better looking than most models were, even after makeup and airbrush.

It was obvious fairy magic at work, and legends were clear that fairies could actually do the sort of thing that Minerva boasted they'd done for her. Then they had Pomona's change to witness this was reliable!

No, the normally reserved teachers nearly started pulling out each others hair for the opportunity to take that potion next. No, even after Minerva explained the potion made the drinker into a dryad, it did not dim their desire to take it. Not even the requirement to breed more dryads phased them.

This was LEGENDARY magic! Eternal youth and beauty in one package, offered to a bunch of mostly middle aged and older women who felt dumpy and had given up on the concept of ever being attractive or finding romance. Your basic feminine nerd who is older and given up. Even Sinistra, the youngest (and fairly attractive already), was in there fighting for her share of it, having been through a few failed courtships that led to phases where she'd despaired over finding someone.

As attractive as Pomona and Minerva were, finding someone would NOT be a problem! The problem would be beating suitors off with sticks!

Luckily Hermione was there to insist there were vials for all, as no fight over dresses in a department store sale had ever threatened to get as heated. Dresses were an insignificant contribution to one's beauty compared to this!

Pomona could wear a sack sewn out of dead mice and still be attractive looking like she did! Minerva too! Then when Trelawney revealed that her true form was as a dryad too...

Harry's head was spinning.

"Well, Mr Potter?" McGonagall demanded in her best school mistress tones, having come silently up to his side while he wasn't looking.

He looked helplessly up at her, unable to find words.

She found a smirk. "I assure you, Mr Potter, that this is a far better way to recruit than to drag them out of their beds at first light."

"It was the only way I could think of," the boy honestly replied, wincing at the mild scolding. "The dangers if somebody refused..."

He was cut off by a shriek of delight as the normally reserved Poppy Pomphrey squealed like a delighted young girl as she got her hands on a dose of the cordial and downed it in one quaff.

Minerva lofted a beautifully proportioned eyebrow. "You were saying, Mr Potter?"

The boy rubbed his forehead. "You might as well call me Harry. Something tells me we are going to be working together for a very long time."

"Indeed, Harry," she replied more softly. Then both stopped speaking long enough to witness Poppy's transformation.

"Hm!" McGonagall let out a delicately surprised grunt.

"Oh?" Harry prompted.

The Deputy Headmistress did not bother to hide her smile for her old friend's sake. "How appropriate for Poppy. She is a Rainbow Pine."

"A Rainbow Pine?" Hannah asked, obviously confused. The group of girls had reformed around Harry during this conversation.

The Head of Gryffindor turned the question aside to Hermione. "Miss Granger, do you know the species in question?"

The bushy haired girl now scrunched up her face as she probed her memory, then began to recite an article obviously memorized from a school book, "The Bifrost, or Rainbow Pine, is a tree of obvious magical properties even to muggles as its needles continually cycle colors from one moment to the next. Tar produced from this tree has powerful medical properties, especially in binding up wounds, and even among muggles was once widely known to heal 'even those cut in twain through their midriff'."

"What does that mean?" Susan asked.

Hermione sighed. "It means that if someone cut you in half right through your middle, leaving your upper half in one place and your waist and legs lying separate from the rest of you, if someone got to you real fast and smeared both halves of the cut with this tar, then stuck you back together, you'd be alright. Not only that, but you'd walk away from the experience. It was also called Troll Pine because of all known creatures only trolls healed that well without magical aid."

"So what you're saying is we'll want to stock up on Bifrost Tar." Harry smirked.

"Well, yes, now you mention it." The brainy Gryffindor replied smugly. In the background, Aurora Sinistra had drawn the next longest straw, and got to go next, quaffing the elixir with evident glee.

"Very good, Miss Granger, twenty points to Gryffindor." Minerva smiled.

The boy was still shaking his head in stunned amazement by the time the light show had ended and the Astronomy Professor's conversion was complete. Mind having been brought back to tree identification, he'd belatedly recognized the species Pomona had become. "Who would have thought Pomona Sprout to be a Whomping Willow?"

Susan and Hannah snorted together, while the latter explained, "Don't be too surprised. She's our Head of House. You have no idea how protective she is."

"Indeed," McGonagall sighed fondly. "Why, I could tell you stories."

"Why don't you?"

"Another time, perhaps. As Harry has intimated, we're going to be working together for a very long time." McGonagall turned to look at her female charges. "That is if what I am assuming is correct, that you four availed yourself of this potion yourselves when it first became available?" Then she registered a bit of shock and confusion, rounding on the boy. "Mister Potter! There is no way a boy such as yourself could have taken a dryad cordial and lived! Certainly not done so and remained male! Explain things at once!"

This outburst was enough to stop the celebrated dryad transformations.

"Ah." Harry thought there was no better way to handle this, so dropped his own human disguise. That was a clock stopper by all accounts. Even those waiting in line for their cordials could think of nothing else for their surprise than the Boy Who Lived and his amazing appearance.

Hermione and Luna dropped theirs as well, and were, if anything, more lovely than the dryads. Only Harry was on their level of beauty. To Hermione this was a blessed relief, as she couldn't get enough of her fairy form of late.

Luna noticed this and frowned over Hermione not taking better care of herself. Still, the now bluenette Granger shook her amazing cascade of hair and, fixing them with her gemlike sapphire irises, told

their professors, "Harry, Luna and I all got new bodies made for us by the Fairy Queen, and we are now her champions."

"Should we be kneeling, or something?" Aurora asked quietly from the back after a long pause where people processed this revelation.

Luna brushed the suggestion aside. "The Fairy Court does not stand on ceremony. We are what we are because that's who we are, not because of how people treat us. Muggle aristocracy may need pomp, but we do not."

"She is right."

The words were not audible, but they struck in their minds with such a forceful impression everyone gasped. An aromatic breeze drifted over the glade. It smelled of rich soil and new blossoms, with just a hint of the sea.

The centaurs and unicorns and magical beasts around the glade, who had been watching the dryad transformations, knelt respectfully. The crowding was less than it had been largely due to the acromantula and werewolf-free nature of the relocated forest. Still, there were many visiting. Every fairy paused in what they were doing, granting their full attention to the voice.

Harry glanced to the side. Trelawney's original oak stood on the banks of the naiad lake that contained the Fairy Shrine. So this wasn't far to reach for a visit. But it had come on them unexpectedly.

Nevertheless the peculiar non-voice of the Fairy Queen continued speaking to her trio of champions in amused tones, "The people responsible for creating your body are called your parents. They provided the material, and thus you are theirs, created of them. Your mortal parents gave you a mortal body, which you lost through foolish actions. I created your new bodies. I provided the material, and thus you are mine. I am your mother, and you are my children. Since I am the Fairy Queen that makes you a Fairy Prince and Fairy Princesses, regardless of how others treat you."

A peculiar leaf-filled breeze brushed passed Harry's shoulders that felt almost like a hug. He noted his two closest friends receiving the same.

Her trilling, spicy scented laugh filled the clearing. "Now you need not be too surprised to hear me. I know my children, and paid the price to create one dryad. Did you not think it would gather my attention when several began to appear in rapid succession?"

Harry then noted the not-unpleasant sensation of someone rifling through his thoughts, just like someone paging rapidly through a filing cabinet. It was a sensation that ought to have felt violating, but all he could feel from her was love and kindness, like a mother fondly ruffling her son's hair.

"Well," the Queen's soft, aromatic voice continued. "I can see that you have managed to expand my gift a hundredfold. It's rare that I create dryads, as it takes her a hundred years of existing to restore to me the energy it took to make her, and they do not often last so long anymore. But I see that in this case I shall be restored my investment in a year or less, followed with rewards of greater. For this I thank you."

No words were necessary for their reply. She read their feelings well enough, including Harry's deeply buried feelings of apprehension and fear over what she'd think of him drafting so many women.

In truth, she surprised him by finding that amusing. "Now, Harry, you mustn't feel badly. Most leaders in times of war will draft any soldiers they can, and not give a thought to their feelings about the conflict. You also did right to feed them that potion that assures you friendship, as despite being dryads and thus bound to obey your orders, they are fairy, and it renders this easier on everyone involved for them not to resent your commands. And they do have responsibilities. You are trying to fight on their behalf in this war. The dark lord who desires to destroy you wants to enslave them just as much."

They could all feel the Queen prompting McGonagall to talk, and she did, "Harry, we are not enslaved. If this were truly against our will, we could become human again just as simply as choosing to do so, and

everything the cordial makes permanent would vanish with it. You will note we have not."

The boy stirred uncomfortably. "Yeah, but you wouldn't. We're best friends."

McGonagall actually laughed. "Harry!" she reproved in bright and joyful tones. "Friendship is not slavery! I have disagreed with my best friends before, even gone against their wishes. Actually I've thought of Albus as my best friend for decades, only now with my mind restored to full function from all of his damage I can recall thousands of instances where I went against his orders. If anything, this has conditioned me to be able to do whatever I feel is right, REGARDLESS of my best friend disagreeing! I have, after all, worked up the gumption to do it thousands of times."

"I don't know a girl alive who wouldn't like to be more attractive." Bathsheba quietly supported her friend and co-worker.

"During any typical year, nine times out of ten when my services are required it is not so much a medical issue, but a girl wanting to safeguard her looks," Poppy contributed, with a small smile. "Acne, and such."

Now Harry got to his real guilt that he'd tried hard to ignore during his drive to satisfy necessity. "Yeah, but none of you signed up to be baby factories, did you? That wasn't what I'd wanted."

"And did you think, for a moment, if we found that revolting we could not end this in a second?" Minerva primly replied. "And how many jobs have ever fully disclosed everything you have to do before you accept them? I can assure you, Harry, when I signed on as a Hogwarts teacher I was not expecting to be routinely obliterated, compelled, and run roughshod over! Frankly, at my age, having children is an opportunity I'd thought I had lost; and I do not think I can describe to you the emptiness that realization carries. When you are a child you are told that success comes from having wealth, fame or a career. It is only when you are old you come to realize how little those mean, and how much of life's joy comes from having a family of

your own. To have missed out on my opportunity to have children was the central grief of my life!"

Several of the other teachers echoed her with, "Mine too," and "Same here." Pomona wept as she nodded fervently, crying too hard to speak.

"NOW do you think you should feel bad for 'forcing' them into this?" Luna demanded of Harry with her arms folded across her chest. "It's like winning a magical lottery! Only no lottery ever gave something as important as eternal youth and a form of immortality! To say nothing of the beauty, extra magic, or other advantages. People have killed for less than this!"

Really, how silly could he be?

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Author's Notes:

Once again I wish people would read this story instead of skimming it. The details they complain over are almost always covered in the material before they even thought to complain about it!

I said before, a dryad can stop being a dryad any time she cares to; and best friends is just that, FRIENDS! You can disobey them if you want to.

So if you want to call it a mugging when he sneaks up on them in a dark alley, heals their wounds and shoves money in their pockets, go ahead.

But an ugly fact is that ANY government will draft soldiers during times of need, regardless of how those troops feel about it. My mother had a teacher who was in Hitler's army, not because he wanted to be, or that he agreed with their cause, but because they came to his village, lined up the young men, pointed guns at them, and made it clear they were leaving that field in Nazi uniforms, or in boxes.

He wasn't even German. It was a Slavinian village.

Nobody likes it, but everyone agrees governments have the authority to draft. And Harry is both of royal lineage as a Fairy Prince, AND a legitimate government as the noble who owns those independant cities he has created.

As he is at war, and they are troops in active service of his enemy, he could have slaughtered them instead and been perfectly within bounds to do so. Would you have preferred that?

No, neither would I. Harry is better than that, offering them a chance to change flags instead. They were already in service, now they can represent the side that does NOT intend to destroy them in the end.

The essence of slavery is someone else owning your efforts, and you not being able to say no. Normal soldiers come fairly close to that, and the world is ok with it. But Harry's dryads can say no any time they care to, either to refuse his requests as friends, or to stop being dryads altogether.

I also made something of an issue a while back of fairies' ability to wriggle out of commands they don't like. That does still apply to dryads, you know. Only, being close friends, they won't do that without real need.

Their situation is BETTER in just about every way than just about any soldier in just about every army I can think of. Really, I would that if any of us were drafted we'd be heaped with such huge benefits, made virtually unkillable, and given a 'leave anytime you want' clause.

They are at war, and someone has to fight so that the rest can remain free. They just get eternal youth and beauty to go along with it.

Chapter Sixty-Seven
by Lionheart

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"You must know your plans for taking on a unicorn's powers through ritual must ultimately fail," the Queen's mental voice hung with a faint touch of moisture in the air, like a fog. "The qualities that define them are beyond any magic you yet command. However," she concluded brightly, as if the sun had broke out from beyond cover, "they do lay within my power. Harry, approach and lay your bundles of unicorn parts out."

Harry did so, laying all ten bales, representing ten avenged unicorns, out on the banks of the pond. Tendrils of mist ran over them like fingers. "Yes, they are as you had been told, fully avenged by you. The man to slay these gentle creatures perished by your hand, nor has he come back. As Bane told you, greater Light magic than this there is not. Do you still desire their power?"

Hermione found her friends' eyes on her, and since it was her idea in the first place, made her reply, "Majesty..."

"Call me mother." The mental words smelled playful.

Hermione dropped a quick curtsy. "Begging your pardon, but I already have one of those. It would feel odd to give her title to another."

"Very well, Majesty will do for now."

If Harry had to guess, he'd say a test had just been passed, but couldn't for the life of him say what.

"Thank you, Majesty." Hermione again bobbed a quick curtsy to hide her nervousness in defending her idea. It seemed so silly now. "We have those hunting us who seek our destruction. We foiled an assassin once by having powers he did not suspect. It was our intent to seek others he would not know of. Toward that end I proposed we

seek a second magical form beyond our ability to become Nemean Lions."

Hermione had forgotten she was nearly surrounded by Hogwarts staff. She got reminded when they gasped over that last revelation.

Still, she did her best to ignore them for now. "I suggested unicorns for their speed and agility. This got seconded by Luna who remarked on the resistance of unicorns to curses. But I mean no disrespect!"

"No, it is well reasoned. Though you may have shot far beyond a mark within your power to hit," the Queen gently chided. "Dragons would be far easier. But you are young and still exploring boundaries. I would give you hints to guide you on your way towards making it possible, but you have so delighted me by the gift of so many more dryads than I paid for that I shall reward you in part with this. Step forward, each of you."

The trio stepped forward, then each arranged themselves next to a bundle on unspoken mental promptings.

"An oath I would demand, but it would be redundant with the one already sworn," the Queen instructed. "Kneel."

The trio did so.

"Majesty," Harry broke the self-imposed silence that hung over them all. "Before we begin, may I present to you Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott? Both are betrothed to me through agreements they are bound to."

Startled out of hypnotic reverence the presence of the Fairy Queen's voice demanded, the two shocked girls jumped out of their socks before mumbling a pair of "How do you do"s. And Susan yanked Hannah down to a curtsy with her, both feeling put on the spot and awkward.

"I do very well, thank you," the sudden breeze that accompanied the Queen's tones smelled amused as she answered the pleasantries as though honestly meant. "Harry, are you pleased with their conduct?"

"I find no fault with them, my Queen," he intoned seriously.

"Then Susan, Hannah, approach and kneel."

The girls tried not to be too clumsy as they scrambled to do so, each finding their own bundle to kneel next to. Hannah paled in fright, although Susan mumbled a soft 'thank you' to Harry as she tried to find her wits and breath from where they'd scattered to, and gather them back together again.

"Do you agree to be bound to my purposes?" the Queen asked these two. "As I have bound these three?"

"Yes, ma'am." "Yes, Majesty."

Harry winced. There went that Hufflepuff loyalty again. They didn't have to ask what terms. If Harry and his other fiancées were already bound to them, that was good enough for Hannah and Susan.

Strangely, they could hear the Queen smile. She spent a moment not even saying anything, but they could hear it, like a rustle of leaves.

When she did speak, he could taste her joyous satisfaction. He could only describe it as 'almost, but not exactly, completely unlike peppermint, but in a good way'. "Then, as you are presented by Harry, who has earned my favor, this boon I will grant him. Harry, empty your Time Turner into the lake."

Drawing forth the priceless artifact out of his shirt, the boy wordlessly broke the glass open with the hilt of his sword and emptied out the powdered fairy wings into the pond, which glowed.

"Now enter," the Queen informed the two Hufflepuff girls.

Hermione opened her mouth in a gasp, seeing the naiads nearby, but managed somehow to keep her peace. The Queen could order those about, she knew. So it wasn't certain death to enter those waters so long as she told you to.

The duo stood, then entered, and as soon as they did they flickered, and when they were back again got cast backwards by an unseen force, rolling to a stop in their former positions. The moment they stopped moving it got revealed they had the otherworldly beauty of Harry and his other fiancées.

"Taken back in time a week, put through the same process that made you fae," Susan, who now sported a beautiful head of red-gold hair, whispered aside to Harry and the other girls as she righted herself.

Hannah, whose locks were now a luscious honey gold, nodded along, taking her former kneeling position while tucking a lock of fine gold hair behind an ear.

Then the Queen giggled, and surprised everyone by announcing, "And now I must insist you steal their knickers, Harry. After all, it is a Potter family tradition, and I can't have you marrying anyone without fulfilling it."

The boy's jaw hung open in shock, his eyes wider than ever.

Hermione blushed furiously. "Uh, me too?" she proposed timidly.

"Yes dear, you too," the Queen's laughing voice replied, smelling of mint.

A bit bewildered, Harry glanced to either side before turning forward and bowing from his kneeling position, a slight grin on his face at her playful mood. It was always a good thing when those in authority over you were not in a foul temper, and better to be asked to do a light and humorous thing than something odious. "As my queen commands, so shall it be."

This left them an out, If they truly didn't want to be with him, they could make that clear by how hard they defended against the panty theft; and it would be a binding way out since their Queen had commanded it.

"Good." Her smugness could almost be felt as a ripple in the earth. "Now, each of you, take the greatest treasure you have on you and place it on the grass before you."

Luna hesitated before laying in front of her the Girdle of Lions. It was hard not to be attached to it because it both saved her life and had been a gift from her beloved Grandmother Alice, and also it had been a symbol of what had been to her the single best period of her life.

Parting with it was hard, but sacrifices had to be made.

Harry slowly reached for the Sword of Gryffindor, still sheathed by his side before he felt gently yet wordlessly chided. Blushing, he reached instead for the Cuddle Companion he carried tucked constantly into his jacket.

Hermione smiled as she saw her friend reluctantly lay down the magic plush animal, fondly recalling how much the boy had changed towards them when he could feel the love that transmitted to him when his friends cuddled the matching animals in the set.

She had to admit, it was a nice way to stay in contact even though they slept in different rooms. But hers was not the most precious thing she had on her. Instead, it was with almost painful reluctance the girl removed the Diadem of Ravenclaw that she'd borrowed from Harry from where it was concealed under her hair. It wasn't strictly hers, but the Queen HAD said 'the greatest treasure you have on you' and so that was it. Nothing else she carried even came close to that.

She could feel a tearing in her heart as she sacrificed it, though.

Wordlessly attention swerved to the other two girls kneeling there beside the pond. It was as if they were searched and found wanting, not having anything on them worth more to them than school clothes, certainly a poor showing in comparison to the other offerings. Attention then swerved back to Harry, as their sponsor, and he produced the ring of Salazar Slytherin and the Sorting Hat, tossing them to the girls, who gladly placed them before them.

Luna and Hermione also got subtle promptings and took out their own stuffed toy cuddle companions to lay them out beside Harry's - because his was only of use to him because of the shared relationships to them.

A swarm of fairies also flew forward, laying the three copies of the Potter family invisibility cloak over the offerings.

"Now all is arranged," the Queen's voice said quietly, feeling like a tickle of frost over their ears. "Touch the bales before you."

Reaching forward, the quintet did so. No sooner did their fingertips come into contact with the white fur of those unicorn hides wrapping the bundles than the entire mass turned liquid and flowed over them, eliciting some startled gasps as it reformed around their bodies.

Each child now wore robes as white as unicorn hide, with split sides so they could move their legs freely. The hooves reformed on their wrists and ankles as elaborate bracers and decorative greaves, all gold and ivory. But it was inside that they all felt the greatest changes taking place.

They could hardly speak for gasping as the entire world took on different shades and colors. Looking around it became like the entire world got colored in various shades of 'trustworthy', 'helpful' or 'nice'.

Or the lack of them in some cases. It was like they could smell or see or hear how... well, how **good** a person was.

They could also sense magic like never before. It was like having been deaf for all of their lives and suddenly being able to hear. For a good while it was all they could do to take it all in and adjust to their new senses.

When they did begin to gather their wits back together again, they noted with some surprise that the gifts they had expected to be sacrificed had not been destroyed at all. Instead, each of them had their copy. They all wore copies of Luna's Girdle of Lions, although these were done on white leather instead of the faded yellow/brown of the old. Cloaks hung round their shoulders that each could sense

was both unicorn hide and held the properties of that cloak of invisibility passed down in Harry's family.

On their heads were pure white copies of the Sorting Hat, standing tall, fresh and blemishless as though wholly new, not even wrinkled. Around the base of the hat where conical part met brim the Diadem glittered under wreaths of butterflies and flowers, and on each of their fingers they had pure gold rings.

Harry noted in some distant part of his mind that the previous crude gold ring was now smooth and far more artistically designed as well as beautifully decorated, but the greatest change was that the stone multiplied with the ring which was once black, now had a different color for each of them. Harry's was white and each girl had a primary color.

In all, it was a great deal to take in, especially with their new senses. Harry was hit worse than all of them.

Eventually he shook his head, tuning in to a conversation that had already been going on. It was the Queen's non-voice he caught first.

"Before that, you must mix the Rampion Elixir."

"Huh?" The bewildered boy blinked stars out of his eyes.

Hermione smiled. "Another name for rampion is Rapunzel. I learned that from an old fairy tale."

Every eye turned to Luna, who shrugged. "Actually no. I'm not genetically related to Rapunzel in any way."

Harry and Hermione were shocked.

Then Luna smiled. "But the *witch*, on the other hand... muggle versions of that tale treat her very poorly. But she was a genius with plants and potions and not ugly at all. And how would you feel if your adopted daughter had been seeing a naughty prince behind your back? Auntie was only trying to keep her safe, and of course punish the scurrilous rake who deflowered her. Muggles seem to think that

having rank makes you a nice person, but it doesn't. He even came back with his knights and hunted my poor great aunt to death for the crime of trying to protect her adopted child's virtue. A travesty of justice, but also a pity her spell workbooks got lost at the same time."

"Quite correct," the Queen's voice dripped merriment. "Although they are not lost. Before they rode her down she came to a naiad lake, since dried up, but managed to toss her treasures in. Those still lies safe and sound in the fairy sanctuary near there. And those include the formulas she was working on to control Rapunzel's gift."

Luna boggled, her jaw dropping open in amazed delight over this news.

"What WAS Rapunzel's gift, anyway?" Susan's head spun.

All eyes swiveled back to Luna, who obliged them by offering this explanation: "At the beginning of that fairy tale a witch who had the most lovely garden was living among muggles. A greedy woman who was her neighbor sent her husband over the fence to steal some rampion she had growing there, and he did. But you must know eating enchanted herbs without any knowledge of what they do is unwise at the best of times, and the witch had been breeding new magical species. No one knew quite what they did. So when the greedy woman's husband came by the second time to steal more herbs, and the witch caught him, she got from him a confession that his wife had already eaten some of her experimental, magical herbs - and was pregnant. Well, the dangers of that were even more extreme than an ordinary person doing the same. So the kindly witch insisted on monitoring things so they didn't go too far astray. And, when the child was born it turned out there were negative effects. Straight out of the womb Rapunzel had hair over eight feet long, and it wriggled about like octopus tentacles. Naturally her mundane parents were horrified, and cast her out right away. Feeling somewhat responsible, the witch took the child in and raised her, teaching her how to control her gift - for she could manipulate her long hair as well as any of you do your arms and legs. Indeed, it grew over twenty yards long, and she could form it into four separate locks each with all the power and finesse of her arms and hands. My great aunt worked tirelessly to help her, and studied this the whole while, eventually learning to

duplicate this gift on purpose. It wouldn't work on the witch herself, the best she ever got that potion it had to be applied to a child less than a year old, but four extra arms could be very useful. Anyway, while they were working they stayed in a tower together. It had no door or stairs because they needed none, Rapunzel could lift herself or anyone else in or out with her marvelous hair. Then a debauched libertine of a prince came along and seduced the innocent girl, and, well, you know the rest - although that part about my great aunt putting out the prince's eyes was a vicious lie! She never did anything like that! It was all an excuse he used to get his father to send knights to kill her."

Hermione's eyes were wide. "That... that's not the muggle version of the fairy tale."

Luna crossed her arms over her chest and turned away, feigning huffiness. "Well, the prince was able to hire bards and storytellers. My great aunt was dead, so she could not. Another thing he left out is that after the challenge of obtaining her was over he grew bored with Rapunzel in under a year and threw her out, penniless, on the street while he went to chase after Snow White, who had lands and things she was in line to inherit. Rapunzel died of a broken heart shortly thereafter."

"Are you..?" Susan hesitated to ask.

"Related to Snow White?" Luna lofted an eyebrow, concealing her smile. "Not at all. It was the queen, her stepmother, who wasn't awful or wicked at all. Only she was a witch. Anyway that story about her vanity and envy was all made up to cover for the fact that Snow White ran away from a marriage that had been arranged for her by my many times great grandmother to a decent fellow who would have looked after her. She fell in with dwarves, who taught her to drink, and after rebuffing all of my great grandmother's attempts to reconcile fell in with that awful prince, who got her pregnant then left her, dosing her with Draught of Living Death while he went to chase after Cinderella, who at least had the sense to wear a perfume on their wedding night that was poison to the evil at heart, and that killed the awful bastard. It was a good precaution, suggested by her fairy

godmother so he wouldn't toss her away in a ditch like the rest of his conquests."

Now Harry's eyes were wide. "So that bit about Snow White and the glass coffin was Draught of the Living Death? What about that anti-evil poison?"

Heck, he could think of a MILLION uses for something like that! Perfuming the halls of Hogwarts, for a start.

Luna snorted, disapproving of the long-ago prince's actions. "Unfortunately the recipe for it was long since lost. And contrary to the tales, the prince didn't save Snow White from that coffin, he put her in there himself; and she is still in there, somewhere, waiting for the antidote."

"You're ruining all of those tales for me, you know." Hermione groused in good natured fun. Actually it was rather exciting to learn some of these things were history!

Ok, well, she'd had some initial reluctance to accept them, but lately? Nah! You just couldn't see some of what they'd done and stay skeptical. Not after meeting the real Alice and the Cheshire Cat.

Luna was unruffled. "No, that was the prince. He did have good bards, though. Very skilled at lying and covering up all of his infidelity."

"Are you..?" Hannah began.

"Related to Cinderella? Yes." Luna primly declared, with more joy than her previous announcements. "After her grieving period was over she remarried to a very nice fellow, and they had a daughter Aurora, whom you'll probably know as Sleeping Beauty. You know how that goes. Anyway, she got released from her spell of enchanted sleep by the son of Snow White's stepmother. And they actually all had decent parents, so were good, responsible people, so were able to actually live Happily Ever After."

Susan tried to change the subject so she didn't have to say she didn't believe her. "Can we get back to the subject? How do we mix that potion?"

"Do we even have to? What if I don't want my hair sixty feet long?" Hannah protested.

"Oh, that's not a problem." Luna dismissed her objection airily. "One of the first things my great aunt did to make it less of a burden on Rapunzel was to enable her hair to change how long it was. Sixty feet was the base length, but she could stretch it longer or contract it much shorter, almost to where the ends were off the floor when she stood!"

"But how will we get hold of her recipes to do that?" Hermione wondered.

"Why, simple. I'll provide access to the shrine that holds her books, of course." Came the Queen's merry reply, proving she still listened in.

"But if it has to be applied to a child less than a year old..." Susan wondered, trying to be practical about things.

Harry smiled at her, "Ah, Susan. I might not have been born yesterday - but it was last month. This fae body I've got is significantly less than a year old, and yours is even younger. The potion ought to work on us just fine."

"And on my new dryads too." the Queen interjected calmly yet wisely.

"Doesn't that mean Dumbledore could use it?" Hermione grew concerned. "After all, he is making new bodies for himself all of the time."

"Not at all," Harry crowed, placing hands on hips while he boasted. "You see, each one of his is actually a copy of a body that has already been around sixty years, at least. Like if you could cast a Duplicating Charm on an old car, it would still have just as many miles on the odometer. Ours are brand new, created fresh just last

month. And while they may be patterned after our old forms, there is nothing of our old bodies in them!"

"Actually, dear, that's not quite true," the Queen corrected softly. "No one person can supply all of the material to create a new body from. It's against the laws of nature for one sentient creature to be both parents to a child. So I had to use some salvaged material from your old bodies to make up the rest. So, while I am your mother, your old body makes up the other parent."

Harry's face twisted into a grimace as he realized that just as he'd accepted he'd fully escaped from that experience without negative consequence, he'd become his own father after all. His old body was the 'other parent' of his new.

The Fairy Queen laughed. "Oh! You should see yourselves! That's why I keep doing that trick. The looks on people's faces are PRICELESS!"

Rather forcibly reminded that their Queen was, after all, mother of a race of tricksters, and thus at least something of a trickster herself, Hermione managed to calm her reaction to the news about being her own daughter (and the girl had NOT expected to be informed she was her own father! But the mother slot was already taken, so that only left... Brrr!) and at least got her face composed straight. "Ok, but wouldn't that potion require more of that long ago witch's experimental, magical herbs? It doesn't sound like any of them survived if the witch who was growing them got murdered and all of her effects lost. Even if her notes survived, it could take decades to reproduce those experiments accurately!"

"Decades we shall have, my dear," the Queen reassured, switching tacks entirely from her moment of humor. "I'll simply send Trelawney back in time thirty or so years and send her on her way to retrieve those effects from that fairy shrine. She'll have all of the time she needs."

"But doesn't the Dumbledore of the past have a... of COURSE" Hermione cried aloud triumphantly. "The Headmaster's oracle was Trelawney herself! And oracles aren't able to make any predictions

concerning themselves! So the Trelawney of the past won't be able to report on her future self to the Headbastard of back then! She is her only blind spot, so the only person we COULD send back that far! As anyone else Dumbledore would be informed of, probably as soon as they arrived! But this way he won't be informed of anything he wasn't going to learn anyway, so his history will be unchanged!"

Harry gave a small smile. "Do you think, if she is going back that far anyway, that Sybil could be allowed to rescue my original parents?"

"Nothing could be simpler." The Queen's voice was soft like falling snow yet firm as a granite mountainside at the same time.

"WHAT?!?" McGonagall blurted, then covered her mouth in shame, reminding everyone of the Hogwarts teachers watching them once again.

The Queen's tone felt warm in a mildly reproving way. "You do not know much of our history if you do not know that it was once widely considered that a person, adult or babe, who died suddenly had actually been kidnapped by the fae and a piece of enchanted wood left in their place. I shall empower her to do so for of all the parents of my champions lost during that period."

"Why are you doing so much for us?" Susan asked softly, suddenly shy.

They could feel attention switch to Luna, but it was not to her the Queen spoke, "My dear, even including those standing here with us now, there are less than a hundred dryads in the whole world! Most are hiding behind rather extreme protections, yet none are as safe as the ones you are creating now. My faithful champions have come up with a blend that cures most of their weaknesses, and cuttings may do the rest. For that I am willing part with a great deal of power expended in rewarding you. Although, I do request you create a second batch of the enhancement potion you mixed with the cordial to administer to my other remaining dryads, as they can apply it to their seeds, and switch to one of them to gain the benefits."

Harry stood up and walked over to Sybil Trelawney, taking a book out of one of his pouches and handing it to her with a soft smile, saying, "Here. This is the book where I've been collecting all of my recipes for enhancement potions, Beautifying Potions, Memory Potions, potions for stimulating mental agility, Re'em blood, Strengthening Solution, Wit-Sharpening Potions and so on. If you'll prepare these ahead of time you may be able to slip them into the cordial sometime, and all of you dryads would have them forever."

The oracle launched herself into a hug of the young man. Then, having released him, admitted with some shame. "I... I've never been much good at potions."

His soft smile was reassuring. "You'll have nearly thirty years to learn. Just give me my book back, when you come back, ok?"

As she turned away nervously to store the book, Harry looked up at the rest of the dryads that were gathered around, seeing they were many and getting an idea of a potential problem that might mean for him.

"Are you going to fight over whose wood I carry?" He asked nervously.

Sybil walked back to the boy, picking up a stick off the forest floor as she did. Then, leaning into his face she snapped it. "This stick is dead." Dropping the aforementioned item, she then reached into his pocket to retrieve one of the trunks she'd made for him. Stroking it lightly, she instructed, "This wood is alive. Do you know how icky it feels to me for you to be carrying dead trees around? Maybe it would feel the same to you if you shoved raw, bloody pieces of human corpses in your pockets, as it does to me when you carry about dead wood - it's disgusting and unclean and makes me want to wash!"

Minerva cleared her throat a bit embarrassed. "I'd compare it to an occasion where your godfather arranged for my panties to become filled with dead rats just as I stood up to a podium to address the school graduation. They had begun to decompose. It was most remarkably unpleasant, and I could no longer even give him a detention for it!"

"It's a sick sensation. Dirty, filthy sick that's both unwashed and..."
Poppy shuddered, unable to complete her comparison.

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Author's Notes:

I can't help be surprised each time I do it, by how FUN it is to write Luna's family history!

And there were a few surprises besides those, as well. I'll bet none of you saw that 'becoming your own parent' thing coming back into play, either. Let me reassure you she just grabbed some genes to partially clone their new bodies from. So, genetically, they are their own offspring, but it's more like cloning. So no squickiness.

More like a mother taking embarrassing pictures of her toddler so she'll have something to embarrass them with later - in other words a prank.

She is queen of a species known for mischief, after all.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

by Lionheart

|||

Harry took himself off into a corner so he could write out quickly all of the details he could recall out of Tom Riddle's memories about raids, who his victims were, and when and where they died - because it occurred to him that if Sybil were going back and had power to replace people right before they died, that perhaps, just maybe, a few more than his parents could be saved.

Minerva found him and discerned his idea and immediately began to add her own information, often prompting him to recall more details himself.

Circumstances around the time were so dangerous she wouldn't be able to save them all. Heck, Harry doubted even he could have saved most of them. But with the dates, times, places and manners of their deaths all spelled out along with circumstances, there was a good chance she could save a few.

Harry's attentions were drawn from this project by a feeling of shock, and it took a moment to identify the feeling as not his own, but transmitted via the Cuddle Companion that was now an integral part of their magic girdles. The cat images on it, worked into the leather, now served as substitutes for the enchantments previously supplied by stuffed animals.

No sooner had he wondered what it was than the duplicated Sorting Hat on top of his head informed him, transmitting a mental image seen from the perspective of Luna, of her hearing Hermione ask the Fairy Queen if, seeing how their unicorn bundles had briefly become liquid, they couldn't somehow be taken back in time and added to the Draught of Draughts so their dryads could be granted unicorn powers via transformation cordial.

The Hat relayed the Queen did her one better, and said not only would she do that, but she could liquefy a set of silver armor and do the same for that - once more, included in her very being like that she

could manifest it at will. Nor could it be stolen from her or lost, even if her dryad form got slain they would simply vanish into the ether with her body and reform at her tree.

Trelawney had already begun to strip out of the silver weapons and armor Bellatrix had gotten for her, to donate them to that cause. So they would not only have a hundred dryads, they would have a hundred armed and armored dryads who were resistant to curses.

Their situation was looking better all of the time! In that moment Harry decided that, not only were his girls geniuses, but although wearing pointed hats might no longer be fashionable, he was unlikely to ever take this one off; even as he got up and rushed over to participate in this conversation.

As he did so, it also informed him that although the cuddle companion powers had been moved to their belts, the Cauldron of Ceridwen was now stored in his hat, and that each one of the five of them had one in their hats.

Harry was less concerned about the storage powers (although those were nice, he had several options in that department) than he was about the mental image he'd only just received describing that otherwise unexplained sensation of shock. "Will you always be able to do that?" he asked the hat.

"Of course, Potter. And I must say it's nice to see my value finally being recognized," the piece of magical headgear replied in his mind. "It used to be wizards were inordinately fond of their hats. Many of them could talk and some offered protection against attacks on the mind or body. Some could improve memory or even calm emotions or heal minor wounds. I can do all of those things, as well as read minds and communicate telepathically, while the only power I don't have is that possessed by the Diadem of Ravenclaw, which is actually able to make the person wearing it smarter. But now that we are working together, the point is moot, unless you separate us."

"No chance of that happening!" the boy thought smugly, before he retracted that statement, "Unless, of course, your personalities are clashing?"

The Hat harrumphed. "Not likely. Although a few magic objects like myself have personalities, most are inanimate lumps. Wizards prefer not to have to argue with their property over whether it will serve them or not. But in my case it was an absolute necessity."

"Oh? Why is that?" The boy was grateful this conversation was happening at the speed of thought, for he hadn't even reached his fiancées yet.

"Mister Potter, I was created by Godric Gryffindor, one of the most amazing warrior-wizards who ever lived. He founded a name and a fame that cannot be slain, and he did NOT do that by being ordinary! I was with him through much of his life, and it was not until the end of his years that he whipped me off of his head and told his fellow Founders that they would place additional enchantments upon me to Sort the students in their absence. Now, what do you think I was doing all those years up until that time?"

Harry realized he had no idea. For so long he'd presumed the only thing it did was sorting. In fact the only name it had ever been called that he recalled was The Sorting Hat - as if it had no other function!

But, if that was the case, why had Gryffindor been wearing it? Already magic enough to have recalled being offered up as the object to sort students?

"I shall tell you, Potter," the Hat resolved his confusion by providing the answer unbidden. "I was originally created to be a combat assistant, acting as a second set of eyes (often in the back of one's head). My first priority at all times is to be watching for dangers around you, so you'll forgive me if most of the time I'm not terribly chatty. And you'll note my wide, floppy brim that countless students have mocked over the generations? Godric, like you, wore armor from neck to toe at virtually all times. But most people don't like talking to a faceless visor, so a full-face helm is out of the question for any kind of social environment. But social environments are the preferred operating grounds of assassins and their ilk, because their quarry can almost always be assumed to be off their guard. Should a spell or a dagger fly out of nowhere at one of those parties even

Godric might not be able to react in time. So in addition to warning him I was to lower my brim between him and the attack, sheltering his face with a layer of enchanted leather armor. My brim can be replaced, though it hadn't been in over nine hundred years until today, but Godric's head and neck could not be. Although I think that function of myself will work better than ever before, as previous to this I was just ordinary enchanted leather. Now I am unicorn hide, and I believe that ought to magnify my resistance to curses to quite an amazing degree."

Harry was so shocked at this wonderful revelation he was speechless.

The Hat was quite smug as it concluded, "There was a reason, Potter, why my pattern influenced hats among witches and wizards for over a thousand years, and it's not because I was so pretty. I can see from any part of me, so even the tall point you students so often despised had a function in that my point of view was eighteen inches taller than the top of my owner's head. Many things that are hidden from eye level can be seen from nearly two feet higher a perspective, and I could even act as a periscope to peer around objects while my owner was under fire."

The Hat fell silent, and Harry filed away this useful information while he burst in on the conversation all of his girls were having over what to go back and include in the dryad cordial, if such additions were possible.

And he solved this dispute simply by listing them all, although most of what had been suggested was already in the book he'd given Trelawney, he did note one thing that had to be explained, as not everything could mix well.

"Ok, now we've got a dilemma." Harry looked up, fountain pen poised over the sheet of paper on which he'd been listing suggestions. "If Sybil is going to be adding anything to our dryad cordial then we'd best plan ahead. Felix Felicis, aka Liquid Luck, would be one of the most mind-bogglingly useful boosts to have, but it combines explosively with malaclaw venom."

Luna gasped, and Harry nodded in her direction. "Yes. The potion IS malaclaw venom given a very delicate serious of buffers and additions to reverse the luck it grants from bad to good. Everything depends upon precise proportions of venom to all the rest of the ingredients. Throw that balance out of whack by adding more or less venom than the potion calls for, and you get disaster. Not just bad luck, but EXPLOSIVELY bad luck! That's why we never tried to cure our cloaks of that venom by dipping it into the potion. The best result we could've asked for would be an explosion that only tore the cloak into confetti. And while the luck that Felix Felicis potion grants will give near-miracles to the imbiber, it has a blind spot in that it won't grant you any protection at all against more malaclaw venom. It's a weakness, and one that cunning enemies can exploit to our disadvantage."

The boy scanned those assembled so they could see his serious expression. "Now that's our problem. Albus Dumbledore is a very cunning foe, and recent events have made him VERY well aware of how potent a weapon malaclaw venom is to use on your enemies. He won't let that trick slip by him, he'll try to use it on us. Now we face a choice: We can include Liquid Luck in our dryad cordials, and it will probably give us a tremendous advantage, for a time. But Dumbledore has been recently sensitized to this. He WILL figure out what is going on and he WILL react to counter us. And one of the best ways he could do that would be to arm his troops with malaclaw venom tipped darts. Our luck won't protect us from anything to do with that venom, and the slightest extra venom will kill our dryad. Boom! Gone. And the luck associated with that reaction could well be bad enough I wouldn't rule out a series of improbable events destroying all of her trees with her. He could pop our entire collection of dryads like soap bubbles with a weapon like that - and we know he would eventually use it, or something essentially like it, on us."

"But isn't there an antidote for malaclaw venom?" Hermione spoke up.

Harry nodded. "There is, and that's our other option. You can't combine the antidote with the venom or Felix Felicis, even under a Draught of Draughts, because the antidote will serve its purpose and cancel out the venom, ruining the Liquid Luck. Luckily that's one case where the other ingredients don't unbalance. Having no venom at all,

there's no explosive in the bomb casing, so to speak. So that's our options as far as this goes. We can take Felix Felicis and use the luck to our advantage, taking the risk he'll pop our dryads like soap bubbles as soon as he figures out what's going on. Or we put in the antidote to deprive him of the ability to use malaclaw venom against us."

"What about us? You say this will protect our dryads, but what about us?" Hannah demanded.

This time it was the Queen who answered. "As unicorns are immune to all poisons, and you have just taken upon you their power, so are you. Both the venom, and the potion that alters its effects are of no use to you. The moment either enters your system they will be neutralized. As will any disease. Unicorns represent purity of body, soul and mind. Corruptive influences like disease and poisons have no part in them."

"So that's really our answer, then," Hermione concluded firmly, while folding her arms across her chest. "Rather than build in weaknesses which can eventually be exploited, I prefer greater protections, and as we can add the powers of a unicorn to our dryads by liquefying one of our bundles and having someone slip back in time to put it in, general immunity to ALL poisons is preferable to only one." Here her face scrunched up. "Actually, they ought to already have that, oughtn't they? That was the purpose of that elixir based on phoenix tears. So the point is moot anyway."

"It would still be to our advantage for them to be able to perceive the world in shades of kindness, trustworthiness and overall goodness." Luna insisted. "That's a priceless gift in a war of treachery and betrayal!"

"Agreed," the others all chorused.

"And," Harry continued, "the more people we have who can do it, the more warning we'll receive of spies and things slipped in among our support bases."

"About that," The Queen's spicy voice interrupted. "The physical and magical defense planning put into those settlements is truly remarkable. However, I am concerned that you put so little thought into their governments. As I am about to have dryads there, that concerns me, especially since this is a war fought more by treachery and betrayal than open conflicts."

Harry shrugged. "That's why we put people we could trust in charge."

"Ah." They'd never smelled disappointment before. It had swampy overtones. "So you are unaware, then, that Dumbledore required Unbreakable Loyalty Oaths from anyone joining his Order? While sounding innocuous, his phrasing was very generic and contained no escape clauses - and the poor, deluded fools swore thinking he was the 'Leader of the Light'. So all former members are bound to obey any instruction he gives them. He merely gives them fewer orders than you'd think, in order to maintain their illusion of free will. But they do get orders - like not to believe children trying to protect a stone."

McGonagall blushed and cast her eyes downward in shame.

Harry's insides had turned to crushed ice. Frank and Alice Longbottom were his sheriff and headmistress at Godric's Hollow, respectively. And while they were good people, bound to him by loyalty imprints from when he'd rebuilt their minds, Unbreakable Oaths were just that - Unbreakable short of death.

In any conflict of interest where Dumbledore demanded one thing of them and Harry's interests required another, they'd serve Dumbledore. His first town was largely governed by sleeper agents - traitors.

It may not have mattered yet because Dumbledore had been too busy to assert that control, but he would.

Then the icy slush in his gut froze into a glacier when he thought of Sirius Black, the man they'd been relying on to see to their backup accommodations in France. All of those measures had to be considered compromised now.

"You might want to pay attention to this," his Hat prompted him, drawing him out of his descent into misery and diverting his attention to Hermione, whose Hat had alerted Harry's of a critical thought budding.

"What about Minerva? Wasn't she a part of Dumbledore's Order?" the girl asked, causing Harry's mind to spin with how many enemy agents he'd built into the fabric of his own plans.

"Oh, you needn't worry about any of that from my dryads," the Queen told them in bright, chipper overtones. "The very first cordial I arranged to clean up Sybil Trelawney, who had been controlled and manipulated to just short of destruction. She had been layered with more spells and compulsions than the press that printed the Daily Prophet, yet I swept all that garbage away in a potion designed to preserve the soul, repair the mind, replace the body, and eliminate all the 'clothes' as I once referred to rituals and extra magic, that were not applied to the subject by Harry himself. You added a few things, but nothing that compromises that core. You need have no fear of them."

While the others were busy feeling relief, Luna privately noted how casually the Fairy Queen referred to sweeping away others' Unbreakable Oaths.

Fairies had long had a reputation of being outside the normal rules, and as their Queen, she would naturally be the most extremely capable among them. Once more fairy magic accomplished the impossible, making it seem trivial.

But then, getting rid of magic that would destroy a body you were already replacing anyway should not have been too surprising. She'd counted on it when planning for Bellatrix' conversion.

Hermione was already declaring, "Why, that's simple then! We simply put our dryads in charge of everything!"

"Even if they were not shortly to become mothers to rather large numbers of children, I still would not advise that," the Queen gently admonished. "Very few fairy creatures are at all appropriate for

governing non-fey. Those who had such abilities before can by and large continue to use them, but do not expect those who don't to pick it up. Our temperament often conflicts."

Harry drew in a ragged breath. "Laying government aside briefly, I think we should grab another Order member or two for our original twenty dryads. If Albus has their unbreakable loyalty, then he won't expect any traitors in their midst, and the best way to break any spy ring is always to insert your own spies in it. Besides, it could help us to tap into any data he's collecting."

Minerva regarded him soberly before slowly nodding. "Might I recommend two former colleges of mine from the 'old crowd'? Emmaline Vance and Hestia Jones would be prime picks for your purposes." Then her lips quirked. "And speaking of having spies within spies, you might want to consider that having someone to look in on the Ministry for us would not be a bad idea."

A flight of flower petals somehow felt like the Queen nodding. "Whenever possible, compromise your enemies' intelligence network by placing your own spies inside to observe it. Because of those oaths Albus trusts these people with tasks he would not give to anyone else. Thus you might learn much. It is a well reasoned plan."

Somehow Harry felt her pointing out it was 'well reasoned' was a kind and parental way to say 'this is no guarantee of success.'

Luna was also nodding. "If they can only be freed by death, or by a dose of dryad cordial, he would never have reason to suspect our spies among his spies, because he believes those oaths to be unbreakable."

Sybil Trelawney raised her eyes in a disturbingly intense gaze. "Even dying with a horcrux in use doesn't cancel them out if you swore the oath on that horcrux - which Albus did in return for similar oaths to get people for his mutual revival pacts. But the regular Order members were his 'white' pieces. They existed to bolster his Light image, and so he did his best to keep them from becoming corrupt. Thus, they have no horcruxes, and he has no reason to suspect they could betray him and live."

And that seemed to settle that.

Harry sighed, then slumped. "So, how do we find good people to govern our towns? The only things I know how to do are to magically bind people - and most of our enemies seem to have beaten me to the punch."

McGonagall slipped into a 'teacher' moment, slipping into lecture pose. "Say rather, how do you *continue* to find good people to govern? That is a much harder question. The founders of any new society generally find a few good people they can trust. But as those societies grow older it grows harder, and harder, until corruption sets in and it becomes impossible."

This prompted Hermione to assume her own lecture mode, slipping into an almost identical pose. "The LAST people you want in positions of power are those who seek them, because those are the people most likely to abuse power. A humble guy who just wants to do his job and go home is more likely to do good for everyone than a man who dreams about forcing his will upon others and is willing to backstab his friends or do anything to get the power to do it; or march people into ovens to maintain it. But the eternal question always stood: How do you select leaders out of those who don't want to lead?

"Muggles tried democracy, getting their neighbors to elect them. Although that has broken down to the point where only those who campaign most vigorously have any chance of getting elected. So once again, you are left to choose leaders from among those who want power so bad they dream of it.

"Actually, the historian Gibbon had proclaimed one of the signs of corruption leading to the fall of the Roman Empire was that public officials spent more money campaigning for a government job than the entire salary of that post added up over the whole term of office was worth. He gave this as proof that justice had become a myth and the authority of government was for sale, because the only way to do that long term means those people to get the offices had to be making fortunes on the side in bribes to recoup their losses - and if

someone has to pay a bribe to get something to happen, objectively speaking that thing was probably not in the public's best interest. That is, until government becomes so corrupt that NOTHING could be done without a bribe, at which point you're FUBAR and had best prepare to meet hordes of barbarians, because your country is teetering on the precipice, only one step away from already fallen, from the perspective of history."

She raised a sober gaze to meet her friends. "Oddly enough, the same thing is occurring now, in that if you don't spent more money campaigning for a government job than the entire salary is worth you can never expect to hold an elected position in any government on Earth."

Now the girl looked sad, holding herself as though cold. "So if you want a government job, forget it unless you want it bad enough to drop vast sums of money on campaigning for it, which effectively makes it an exclusive club - you have to have lots of money in the first place, and really want whatever power comes with that position because you have to be willing to pay truly outrageous sums of money even for a chance at getting it."

Now she looked genuinely scared. "Exclusive clubs have never run any government well. Forget the humble guy just doing his job, you're back to having only those who dream about power competing for the posts. Once again it brings things back to 'those who want positions of power are the last people you want to fill them' rule."

Hermione actually sobbed back tears as she admitted to the group. "So the muggle experiment has failed. Getting neighbors to select people who did not want the jobs has failed. In fact, in most so-called 'democratic' countries it is rapidly becoming a hereditary aristocracy where those jobs get handed down in extremely wealthy families, electing just another Bush or Kennedy."

"Unicorns can tell good people," Luna stated quite calmly and reasonably.

"Trouble arises when all of your people are bad - which happens more often than you might think," Harry stated morosely, having just

reached the sad realization that he'd never get his parents back, because if they didn't die then they'd still be under oath to Dumbledore - just like Sirius.

"Also," McGonagall contributed delicately, "Good does not always guarantee competence. A few people of genuinely good hearts and nonetheless quite feckless. I've known one or two business owners who were so generous to the downtrodden or charitable causes they went out of business."

"This is actually two problems," the Queen's voice intoned softly. "One is how do you prevent all of your people from eventually going bad - a problem no mortal society has yet fixed. The second is how to select the best of your people for the job, rather than getting the worst. And there is an answer."

She now had the total, undivided attention of all present.

"Harry, present me with the egg of a phoenix," she commanded.

The boy's heart fell out of his chest down into his shoes.

"Wait!" Luna bounced before him excitedly. "There WAS one of those in the Department of Mysteries! My Grandmother Alice took it along with everything else down there once she got freed by you!"

Harry stared in wonder as Luna contacted her grandmother and had the egg back in a moment. Too tired by the repeated shocks of leaping in and out of despair to feel anything, he silently presented that egg to the Fairy Queen.

"You aren't going to destroy it, are you?" Susan blurted out in concern.

The Fairy Queen actually laughed. "I cannot. You need have no worry about that, my dear. It is merely my intention to catch the hatchling's First Song."

"First Song?" Hermione cocked her head, wondering at the emphasis.

"Yes dear, the song of a phoenix is truly remarkable, but the first time they sing out of the shell has a wonder and quality unlike any other."

"So, you're going to make it hatch?" Hermione wondered curiously.

"No dear," if snow bubbled, that was the sound. "A phoenix is as hard to create as they are to destroy. But I am going to use this as a material link, along with my mastery of time, to look ahead and listen to a song it has not yet sung. For it will hatch eventually. There is no doubt of that. Now do be a dear and don't interrupt, this is going to be tricky even for me."

On no further discussion, the Queen had Harry produce six of those bales of phoenix feathers they'd stolen from Dumbledore, slicing them open to spill those feathers out, all of which curled up and transformed into little sea shells. Hermione was reminded of the myth of holding a sea shell to your ear and you could hear the sea.

Suddenly there was the most beautiful song. It was such rapture to listen to that no one there could tell how long it lasted. But when it was over they all felt, better, nobler beings than they were before. In some cases it was even visible, Luna was probably an inch taller and better filled out than before.

There came a heaviness to the Queen's mental voice that had not been there before, as if she was exhausted. "There. Now the little feather-shells have caught enough of it, and shall continue to play it softly beyond human hearing until they are destroyed. Implant these secretly all around your towns. The song is simply unbearable to evil, despite their being unable to hear it. So it will drive them off. Evil creatures can enter the area, spend a few hours, even destroy your village. But they will feel uncomfortable and in danger all the while, and will be unable to rest, so would inevitably leave. How long they can stand it is up to the creature itself, and is based upon willpower.

"Now I would caution you this song will not prevent residents from going evil, but they will be unable to remain if they do go down that path. I leave how to distribute them up to you to decide, but would suggest putting one in each of the cornerstones of your buildings' foundations as a start. Hide them in the cleverest ways that you can,

and be plentiful in their use. But do not tell anyone what they are or the purpose they serve. Keep that knowledge among the fey, because if others should learn of this, creatures like Dumbledore would spare nothing to remove or destroy them - for the very reason that these are your first defense against the dishonest, vile or corrupt ruling your towns. Because with these in place, those types will be unable to bear living there. They won't even like to visit."

Suddenly Trelawney's tree formed a new leaf that quickly grew to be seven feet long and as wide as a parchment. It was not an accidental resemblance, because it also grew covered in writing before it detached itself and floated down into Hermione's waiting hands.

"I had intended to give you a three tiered defense against evil ruling your towns, but I grow weak, and you must prepare the other two yourselves. This scroll describes how to prepare goblets not unlike what the Goblet of Fire was used for by wizards to decide contestants in that tournament of theirs, although more reliable. Build one for each town and have it select candidates for government out of the general population. You have in your possession Dumbledore's notes for the replacement Sorting Hat he'd intended to create after the original had gone missing. Those are based on decades of research into the original. Create your own, one for each town, and have them Sort through the candidates to find who would do the best for each position."

"Now copy down these numbers."

The teens obediently did so.

"Are these part of some arithmatical formula?" Hermione asked when she could no longer bear her curiosity.

"No," the Queen's tired but merry voice replied. "They are the account numbers and access information to several major drug cartels' savings. Dumbledore knows next to nothing about muggles, so I want you to withdraw a couple of hundred billion from those accounts to hire some to find ways to hide our kind from Dumbledore forever. Mortals are infinitely clever, while we fairy tend to get set in our ways. So I want that cleverness working to defend us, for once."

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Author's Notes:

Ah, me. Yet another instance of "Wherever Harry goes, Dumbledore's been there first." Now how is he going to deal with the fact that several of his most trusted allies (the Longbottoms, Sirius) are sworn to serve his enemy?

Also there is the small matter of his parents being sworn, too. That greatly complicates saving them, if he even wants to save them at all at this point.

Anyway, just a few more chapters like this one dealing with dangling threads then I can get to Dumbledore beating them all like a rented gong, conquering the world, and having himself declared god-emperor of mankind.

Ok, so maybe I won't let him go quite THAT far!

Chapter Sixty-Nine
by Lionheart

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Harry stared about the clearing at the world's newest twelve dryads. It had started with Sybil Trelawney, gone to include Bellatrix and Narcissa Black (the latter of whom had become a Fairy Linden, aka a Fairy Lantern. A magic tree whose color, shape and bark was very attractive, not unlike the normal linden tree. But instead of leaflike flowers it bore little lanterns that fairies liked to dwell in. With the glow of fairies in and around its branches, it was a far superior ornamental tree than many nowadays have seen; but most had been cut down by wizards over four hundred years ago during that great gold rush on fairy wings, and because of limits imposed by the Statute of Secrecy the species had yet to make a recovery).

The transformation of the assembled volunteers had completed with Irma Pince, the Hogwarts Librarian.

Harry frowned. "What species of tree is that? I'm not familiar with it."

Rather to his surprise, it was not Hermione who answered, but a smiling Pomona Sprout. "I don't know what the muggles would call it, but among wizards its simply known as a Lacquer Tree because its highly toxic sap is used to create varnish."

"Why am I not surprised that she would become a poisonous tree?" Harry grinned. The librarian was not well liked among students. Feared now after the recent spectacle, but not liked.

"Not only that, but a valuable protector." Pomona nodded approvingly - and he had to remind himself the currently button-faced, thin strip of a girl that was bouncy and full of energy to a point where some would call her 'too cute to live' standing next to him was actually the spirit of a Whomping Willow.

Of COURSE someone like that would value the qualities of a protector!

On that account, he was a bit surprised she wasn't getting along better with Bellatrix Black, who had become a Silverthorn Spruce, another magical tree with the ability to defend itself. Actually considered something of a menace (which was appropriate) and one of the most dangerous magical plants alive (which, oddly, was also appropriate to this witch) they had the ability to fire their needles in huge volleys, hundreds at a time - which would be bad enough all by itself but, being magical, they could penetrate any of the available anti-arrow or anti-bullet charms, and were tipped with a slight venom capable of inducing hysteria and convulsions.

They were accounted as dangerous pests, the worst of all magical weeds, and strictly controlled. There was actually a bounty on them outside of a single, small reserve. Which made it just about the most appropriate tree anyone like Bellatrix Black COULD have turned into!

In the wild, those trees would fire on anyone, magical or not, from desire to watch them fall as often as not. But, seeing as how Bellatrix was a dryad she could control her tree (which was truly just controlling herself) to fire only on approved targets.

That made her even more of an element of defensive landscaping than Pomona was. Which, Harry thought belatedly, might be exactly why they didn't get along with each other yet.

Hermione chortled, and seeing who she was watching, Harry turned to her in confusion. "What's so funny about our Astronomy teacher being a Frankincense tree?"

All too willing to share in her merriment, she told him, "Oh, Harry. What is the single most famous reference to Frankincense in history?" At his blank look she offered, "The Nativity! The Wise Men bringing gifts to Jesus that first Christmas! And how did those Wise Men get there?"

"By following a star," Harry continued ruefully, now getting the joke.

Pomona, who appreciated hardiness in plants, also smiled and added her own two cents. "Frankincense trees are also considered unusual

for their ability to grow in environments so unforgiving that its been documented they can grow directly out of solid rock."

Harry looked to Hermione, wide-eyed. But she nodded along to confirm their Herbology Professor's words. "That's true, Harry. No one knows how they first get attached, but the frankincense trees growing out of solid rock form a broad disk at the base of their trunks that conforms to the surface of the rock. Actually, they are considered to give a superior form of incense to the trees growing merely out of broken rock or gravel."

Pomona smiled and granted her twenty points for the additional information.

Harry caught sight of their Muggle Studies Professor out of the corner of his eye. She was, of all things a pomegranate (and he hadn't the slightest clue why) chatting merrily with her friends among the staff, all of them taking joy in looking as young and pretty as women could possibly be.

Charity Burbage was one of the few who had successfully made her escape to France during the tumult of the Prophet Disaster. However, she had foolishly returned to England a few days later to reclaim some possessions left behind at her home, been captured by aurors, obliviated and sent back to work at Hogwarts. Most of the staff and students had been told she'd been out sick those few days, and accepted the whole situation without question.

Now they were all learning differently about each other, sharing Obliviated experiences. It would be a grim party except for the joy prevailing in their changes and the hope everyone felt in their futures.

"Harry?" Luna called, "We're ready over here."

The boy looked over and the device she and Poppy had been working on, the elderly, hieroglyph covered piece of pottery meant as an offering bowl was now glowing softly, surrounded by wisps of light like smoke.

According to the school nurse, this was the device they had used to 'kill' a potion so that Nearly Headless Nick could take it, and they were about to see if they could do the same to a dose of dryad cordial for Myrtle the Ghost.

And that meant it was time to summon the ghost.

"Harry," came the Queen's tired voice, sounding more than a bit sleepy in a mild and nourishing way. "Have you prepared a magic core for her?"

The boy glanced dumbly to his friends, who had no more answer than he.

A million autumn leaves fell, accompanying the Queen's yawn. "The great secret to these dryads and the longevity I expect to come for them is not so much their static protections as their magical cores. Armor, weapons and secrets have all been overcome before. But a human magic core allows her to defend herself from wizards in a way no nymph before has done, by using the same skills, devices and powers they use against her to protect herself. But ghosts are dead, and have no bodies for me to pluck magic cores from."

Harry smacked his lips, and saying, "I'll be right back," departed.

Minutes later he'd returned, dragging five ragged bodies floating through the air behind them. Stopping, he allowed his cargo to come to a rest on the green grass around him, revealing what looked like the corpses of victims of starvation, wrapped in tattered rags, remnants of finer clothes.

Looking askance on his cargo, he explained, "Azkaban is on low guard right now because there hasn't been a real threat in years. But they never guard the bodies of those prisoners who've been dementor kissed really well. If you want a living body to harvest magical cores out of, but no soul or anything to get in the way, these are it."

The boy made a face revealing his distaste. "In fact, if you want I know the spells to cause possession. We can summon the spirit we

want, I can shove it into one of these bodies, and we can force-feed it the potion. The condition of the body shouldn't matter because that's getting replaced anyway. All it needs is to be alive, have a magical core and a spirit inside it, right?"

"That would work far better than killing the cordial, which I feared might give her a dead tree, but could not be certain, so I didn't say anything," the Queen's tired voice replied, smelling sleepy yet relieved.

Hermione blinked, and then declared, "That's brilliant, Harry!"

The boy rubbed his eyes. "Sorry. Not my idea. One of Tom Riddle's plots to come back in case he should die involved stealing one of the dementor-kissed bodies from Azkaban and possessing that as his new form. He had the routes and protections of the place memorized. He just didn't count on wards meant to help contain the dementors there keeping his spirit body out."

Luna cocked her head at him. "How many dementor kissed bodies did they have?"

He waved a hand toward the five near-corpses on the grass. "I brought their whole collection. They don't stay long in this condition before passing on, so it was easy to Confound the guards to believe they'd all died naturally and been properly disposed of. And I didn't want to leave any behind, since that IS one of the routes Voldemort hoped to use to return to life."

"You need one more," Luna told him directly and firmly, her Gift flaring up.

Harry thought about it. "Right. Back in one second."

He left and then returned again moments later. In his hand was a plushy. "Here, Albus Dumbledore himself. I just got him kissed, so this body now has no soul inside of it. Got a GREAT magical core, though." He restored it from plushy to petrified human form, not wanting the spell he'd cast transforming it to become permanent.

He presumed the petrification would be undone by the change to a dryad, as it was not HIS gaze that had turned the Headbastard to stone. And the way the Queen set it up, only magic he applied...

He poured a Mandrake Restorative Draught over the body, not wanting to take any chances. It slumped soullessly to the grass as soon as he did so.

Minerva sighed in wondering awe. "One fragment of the Headmaster's soul down, only twelve more to go."

Poppy needled him to transfigure all of the bodies into girls, just so as not to cause any unwanted complications, as none of them really knew what would happen if a male body took the cordial. Nor did they want to know.

Besides, Susan agreed with her, feeling it would be a little creepy to have girl ghosts possessing boys' bodies, even if only for a little while.

Luna had started mixing polyjuice.

Harry started looking around. "Where's Hermione?"

"Gone to get her parents," Hannah answered. "Luna insisted."

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"Hi, Hedwig, old girl," Hermione lifted her arm and accepted the owl landing on her shoulder gracefully. Wizard robes were padded for that sort of thing. It must happen alot, she figured.

She checked, no return letter.

Hermione waited nervously in the park nearest to her home. She figured this was the closest place she could get that she was least likely to screw up by her fairy presence, here in the middle of the muggle world, and had sent a letter to her parents asking them to meet her there.

Already the slide on the jungle gym had slithered off somewhere. The swings had flown off after transforming into blackbirds, and the frame itself had simply grown bark and leaves.

And THEN it had walked away!

She would have nothing to sit on except that toadstools had bubbled up out of the concrete. Several were conveniently seat-high, others were table sized, and still a few more stood tall enough to be umbrellas, and all were solid and woody. In all it was rather pleasant, like sitting at an outdoor cafe. Still, she'd forgotten just how carefully managed and manmade some of these 'natural' environments were. The sprinkler system had spontaneously transformed into magical earthworms that weren't in any of her books (as none of the ones she'd studied had blowholes), and she suspected might be a new species, seeing as how they were swimming about in the lawn, spouting like whales and sending up little bursts of water every time they surfaced.

The whole scene was a little weird, but it was getting the lawn watered. Since the concrete paths may have spontaneously transformed into peanut brittle, though, that might not be such a good thing. They were beginning to get a little soggy, and she suspected they might run away. Which form of that expression they used would be the question.

Firenze was right. She couldn't dwell in the muggle world anymore. It was like she was tearing it apart just by visiting even for this brief little while.

What's worse, she could see it spreading. The asphalt of the roads nearby had begun to bubble where the edges met the park, and she was wondering if that might be the beginning of a new tar pit, or something else.

In any case she didn't have much time. A group of school kids had come by, knocked down a giant candy cane that the street lamps had become, and run away with chunks of it. News would spread. She'd be drawing crowds soon.

Visibly she fretted, not knowing that this caused the environmental effects she was causing to spread yet wider and grow more intense as she bled out more magic in her nervousness.

A hardened lump of bubblegum that someone had spat out ages ago, and that had settled several inches deep into the lawn, suddenly transformed into a pink seed, germinated, and sprang into a tall tree right behind her - leaves a soft, bubblegum pink, chewy like gum and nicely flavored.

Though the girl didn't realize it, she was exhausting herself with the amount of magic she was pouring out in her nervous condition.

Hermione idly accepted the glass of pink lemonade a vending machine had waddled up and handed her, not noticing how furry or bearlike it had become.

"Hey, lady, are you a fairy?"

Hermione broke out of her cycle of worry to look up at the little five year old girl who'd addressed her. Five of her friends huddled behind her. It must be getting around lunchtime, kindergarten had let out.

She gave the girl a lopsided smile. "That's right. What gave it away?"

The little kindergartners looked up at her, wondering how she could be seriously asking. "How could you not know?" Their leader blurted, pointing, "You have butterflies and flowers on your hat, a jeweled crown," she pointed lower, "and a white dress on. Plus you have pretty bracelets and stuff."

Hermione had to admit, objectively, this was true. As the wind blew one of her blue locks of hair passed her face, she realized she hadn't even reverted back to her human disguise. She'd been so worried she'd forgotten!

"Plus, weird stuff is going on around you," one of her friends interrupted.

Hermione was about to try to put her off by asking what she meant when a pixie flew up and served them all half-sandwiches, which it laid out on little leaf plates, after it had seated their party around the toadstool table. The vending machine came by again, serving all of them drinks.

As the little girls ate their sandwiches, patiently waiting (for five year olds) for an explanation, Hermione decided her story of being made up for a play just wasn't going to cut it.

"Totoro!" One of the kindergartners pointed to the former vending machine, which grinned widely. "I know you! You're Totoro!"

Deciding that it didn't matter what the kids called the vending machine, or what she told them since Obliviators would be visiting everyone around here shortly, she shrugged, "Yes, that's Totoro. Anyway, I am fighting against an evil wizard who has legions of werewolves and giant spiders at his command, and I came here hoping to meet a mortal couple because their daughter is in danger and they must go to her."

"Danger? What danger?" Hermione looked up to see the older woman who'd snapped that out, having not noticed the children's chaperone before.

Oh, well. One more to be Obliviated. Didn't matter. The Ministry was cleaning up after this sort of thing all of the time, and it helped her in a way she couldn't describe to talk about it, even in a joking way.

Hermione threw back her head and proclaimed in a good impression of Luna, "In the first place you have to believe there are fairy worlds as well as normal worlds, magic worlds as well as ordinary ones, and that Wonderland and Oz are both real places, Rapunzel was real girl, and other fairy tales are simply documentaries, for the most part."

"So there was a real Alice in Wonderland?" a child wondered out loud.

"Of course! I've met her!" Hermione laughed brightly, feeling relieved, she didn't know how. "In fact I am very good friends with her granddaughter, Luna. Dorothy of Oz is her great-aunt! And Sleeping

Beauty and Cinderella are her many times removed great grandmothers!"

Seeing jaws drop wide open and eyes glaze over, looking beyond her shoulder, Hermione glanced that way, seeing only a grin. "Oh, hello Cheshire."

The rest of that cat faded into view. "Hello yourself, Princess."

She handed him a biscuit that the vending machine, now named Totoro, had insisted on giving her.

"You spoke of danger?" the chaperone demanded.

"That's right," Hermione felt happy to be back on subject. Then, deciding that she didn't need them anymore, reached for her bookbag. When she did not find what she wanted on the top she threw open the flap and climbed down the stairs inside, returning moments later with a small stack of books.

These were part of the Boy-Who-Lived series of stories written for a magical audience while Harry was still in hiding. She'd gotten them long ago, before she'd met him, and the boy and his fame were nothing alike, so she'd stopped caring much about these false tales.

Waving her wand, she caused them to float in the air before her tiny audience, not noticing it was growing as other children and the crossing guard joined them.

A wave of her wand opened a floating book to the appropriate page. A picture of Dumbledore, because no book could be printed in their world without singing his praises, it seemed like.

"In our world there is a terrible dark wizard named Albus Dumbledore. He has great power, but most of his danger is due to the fact that he can present himself as a light wizard - much like Saruman did in Lord of the Rings. Doing this he has deceived countless good creatures, and made them into his slaves. For this reason we call him the Master Manipulator, or the Twinkling Tyrant, because of the ways his eyes twinkle when he smiles."

She waved her wand and more pages turned, this time showing a picture of a very young baby Harry with his parents. "But a young boy was prophesied to defeat him."

Harry wasn't, but it made for a good story; and did away with all sorts of tedious explanations they couldn't understand anyway.

She flipped more pages, showing Voldemort attacking them at Godric's Hollow. "So Dumbledore sent his twisted servant, Voldemort, to destroy him."

Flip, a page turned, showing Voldemort's defeat at Harry's hands. "Only something special happened. The bad wizard used a spell that had never been blocked or stopped before. No one had ever been touched by it and lived. But Harry did. That is how he came to be known as The Boy Who Lived. He not only stopped it, he turned it back on the wizard who attacked him. The magic of the boy was so strong this terrible dark wizard, servant to an even more terrible dark lord, got destroyed instead of him."

The children made proper appreciative 'ooh', and 'ahh' sounds.

"Naturally, the Twinkling Tyrant realized he had to have this new power, and so he has been trying to destroy Harry Potter ever since."

Telling things eased her heart, and soon both she and her audience became so engrossed in the tale she'd been spinning that she never noticed the news van that pulled to a halt outside the park, spilling reporters, alerted by the man with binoculars and a camera with a telescopic lens (who insisted all he did was bird watching) that had phoned them.

Their cameras and microphones had spontaneously turned to leaves and twigs and one very surprised walrus before they got within a hundred yards of her. So by the time they'd called in reinforcements, the press had learned to keep their distance, and tuned in only with long range pickups.

Hermione had been speaking for an hour before she noticed a commotion as police tried to eject the newest news van to arrive. Startled, the girl looked up from her tale of how the Dark Lord Dumbledore used his wicked mind control magic to take over the wizard police sent to arrest him, to see her park of somewhat unnatural reality surrounded by policemen, who had signs and barricades up a safe distance around the effect that turned all of their equipment into assorted things (they were still trying to control the infestation of four hundred bright pink weasels that liked to scurry up people's pants and sing about how lonely they were - no one even knew what those weasels had been before being transformed), and the crowds beyond that barricade stretched as far as the eye could see. Most people had cameras or binoculars out.

A news van, a new arrival, had tried to push through this so they could film the main attraction - her. And the fuss this caused had alerted her to the audience she had brought.

Storytime stopped.

Hermione would have left right then, being dreadfully embarrassed, realizing at last that the only reason the Ministry Obliviators were so late getting on scene was that Dumbledore still controlled their minds, and Dumbledore was not available right now to give them any orders. Being mind controlled, they had no initiative of their own, so did nothing without orders.

As she stood up to leave, however, she spotted her parents' faces among the crowds. The people she'd been waiting for were right there, probably arrived soon after the barricades went up.

Well, Luna'd said to get them. Luna knew what was needed. Who knew WHY this was needed, but this might be the last time she'd see them alive if she didn't get them. They might die in an accident, or be murdered, or... actually all she really needed to know was that they were needed. That was enough.

If they were needed, then not having them was bad. If not having them was bad, then having them was a good thing. And she didn't know if she'd wasted too much time already.

Hermione started striding imperiously towards the barricade.

Seeing she'd noticed her audience at last, a pair of bobbies approached her. At least she assumed they were bobbies, they were wearing leathers that looked like they'd been bought from the local pawn shop, and had 'POLICE' written across them in chalk.

Oh, yeah. Uniforms made by factories out of cloth made by machines had probably not survived her aura too well. For that matter neither had their badges, or utility belts, or shoes. The two burly cops were barefoot as they interposed themselves in her path.

"Hold it, miss. You're to come with us to answer a few questions."

She gazed coolly at them. Were they idiots? "Your station house could not survive my presence. Nor could any prison, nor any street you drove me down for that matter. All this," she waved a hand to indicate the fairy land around them, "is involuntary. I could sooner stop breathing. The longer I stay in your world, the more damage I do to it. So if you'll excuse me, I'll just get done with the errand I came for."

She tried to walk around, only to be blocked again. One of them tried to lay a hand on her, but all without meaning to her aura flared with fire, burning all things to ash in a circle three feet wide around her.

The man REEKED of vice and dishonesty, and her unicorn nature was repelled, acting automatically to trigger her other innate defenses.

The cops had both jumped back too quickly to be burned, although the one held his hand as though it'd gotten a bit too warm for comfort. The other held one of his arms in the air - obviously a signal. If Harry had arranged this, that would be to alert someone at a distance, probably to do something if his arm dropped without some counter signal ahead of time.

So they probably had a police or royal marine sniper out there. Or four or five. It's what Harry would have done.

Four more bobbies were approaching, all dressed the same, all burly men (mostly because none of their weapons or gear could survive coming near her) obviously intending to enclose her - although after that latest display of fire, none of them were looking too keen on the concept.

Hermione drew herself tall. "By the authority of the Fairy Queen, who was old when this island was new, I command you to let me pass."

"Sorry lass, canna let ya do that," one replied.

"Don't make us use force, miss," another replied.

Now her gaze grew frosty. "I know you're just doing your jobs, but I'm afraid that I really have to be getting home now." She quirked her lips. "Or I just might turn into a pumpkin."

One of them fainted while two of them rushed to grab her hands.

"Which would make you the mice."

Ignoring the six small rodents now racing about her feet in confusion, the girl called back to the shocked school crossing guard who was the closest adult witness of this exchange, "Tell them they'll be human again at midnight! Although I can't do anything to make the first one who'd tried to grab me any less of a rat than he already was when he met me!"

Really, there were good, honest cops in this world. But that man wasn't one of them! His aura was positively revolting!

No one tried to oppose her as she resumed her walk towards the barricade, although cameras and directional microphones tracked her every step and swish of her long, blue hair.

Equipment started to short out on her approach, but no one seemed to care.

She'd just about reached the line of people when a hint of white in a now defunct camera caught her eye, and she reached forward into the lens like it was an open window, drawing out a familiar white dog.

"SPAZ!" the girl cried out, laughing as the happy dog licked her face while she held him up in surprise. She just had nuzzle her wriggling prize. "We thought we'd lost you when that awful movie projector ate you!"

Spaz' reply was to continue to lick her face thoroughly. She giggled.

Out of the awestruck silence witnessing this scene, one voice cried out, "Are you a good fairy?"

"The best!" Hermione winked at whoever it was, well, in his general direction, anyway, before tucking the dog under her arms and resuming her walk to her parents.

"I lost a tooth!" One child who had squirmed past the barrier, only to be caught and held in his frightened mother's arms volunteered.

Hermione couldn't resist herself. "You have? Let me see. That's right, that's a tooth, alright. I'll make sure to alert the tooth fairy to this at once!"

"Don't worry, your Majesty, I've already relayed the message," her Hat spoke aloud to the shock of her whole audience. "One of them will be with her shortly, unless you'd rather do the exchange yourself?"

This rather shocked Hermione to her bones, as she'd felt she'd been joking. But rather than force the family to put up with government types camped around the child's bed all night, pulled out a gold coin and accepted the tooth in trade before quickly hurrying on.

"Tell Santa I've been good!" Another child yelled out.

"Sorry, I would never lie to him! And that's a naughty look you've got if I've ever seen one!" In truth, he was a greedy bully if she read his aura right.

Privately, she was starting to wonder for the first time since she was four if there might not be a real Santa Claus after all. If so, Luna was probably related to him.

"Are you a fairy princess?" A reporter appeared in front of her, waving a dead fish about that used to be a microphone.

"Yes."

"Do you live in a castle?"

"Yes. It's invisible, and the Laws of Physics have nicely agreed to arrange for the circumference of the property to equal zero without shrinking the inside so my poor pet dragon doesn't have to kill any nosy solicitors. Now do be a good parrot and fly away and stop bothering me."

The now transformed reporter did so, with an accompanying noisy squawk.

That 'revert at midnight' was a useful trick. She'd have to remember it.

Finally she reached the barrier, and the two pale faced bobbies who stood guarding that part of it had turned about to face her, now dressed entirely in cold cuts, with a banana in each holster.

Someone must have given the order, because several shots rang out. Full metal jacketed slugs ran into her anti-bullet shield with about as much effect as flicking oil droplets at an anvil, before falling to the floor as real slugs dressed in jackets of slimy mucus.

The dog under her arm let out a playful bark, tongue wagging.

Suddenly she recalled that she could turn invisible and did so. No one would know in the coming confusion that two muggle dentists disappeared.

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Author's Notes:

I actually didn't intend to write that last scene at all. She was supposed to fetch her parents without anything interesting happening at all. But then I couldn't do that, and it just kept growing and growing.

Sometimes this story surprises even me.

Chapter Seventy
by Lionheart

|||

Headlines around the world that day read "THE FAE ARE BACK!!!"

Magical England was in a diplomatic crisis not seen since the Founding, with other Ministries of magic having learned of a massive breach in their secrecy from, of all sources, their own muggle newspapers.

Dozens of film crews along with hundreds of cameras and thousands of eye witnesses had seen a fairy princess causing chaos in the middle of London - and every minute of that got shown on international TV, most of it live.

Nothing short of Divine Intervention could save the Statute of Secrecy now (and that did not seem to be forthcoming).

The Obliviators didn't even know where to start. This was too massive. They didn't have the numbers to even begin on such a massive, worldwide cleanup operation, to say nothing of all of the recordings.

The man who claimed he was just a bird watcher had had the fairy princess under surveillance from just moments after she'd arrived, and between his collection of long range cameras and microphones, had gotten pretty good recordings of her entire visit, including earlier periods nobody else had.

He was now negotiating to sell the rights for thirty percent stock in Playboy.

Muggle police were still trying to catch the furry blue soda bear machine that was repeatedly being spotted by small children in that area. Scientists had already cordoned off the area around the pink bubblegum tree.

Various snack companies were already bidding on the rights to it.

Sprinkler Worms had been caught and captured and were under study in every major university and government think tank in Britain. They did not have a scientific name or classification yet, but it was only a matter of time.

And film of the fairy princess telling the story of "Harry Potter and the Dark Lord Dumbledore" was not only being rebroadcast on several channels (with Hollywood already hiring scriptwriters and making sets), but was being actively and intensely studied by some of the brightest, most serious chrome-domes in the world, picked apart for every nuance of meaning.

Dark government laboratories that never saw the light of day were now watching, and intently dissecting every detail of, a stock of film that looked to have been taken from a children's show.

And greatest of all the treasures of this visit, the fairy princess had left her books about The Fantastic Adventures of Harry Potter behind, and the lady chaperone to the original six children had taken them and scanned them and put their contents up on the internet.

Whereupon they'd been downloaded by practically everyone who had a computer. So the entire world was reading how the boy prince who lived in an impenetrable magical castle with his relatives who loved him defeated a dragon at the age of three.

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After all their planning the actual creation of the former-ghost dryads was almost a non-issue.

Almost.

The summoning was no problem. Harry had conducted a small experiment a week ago where he'd been eying Myrtle floating around, surreptitiously palmed Slytherin's Ring and spun the Stone three times.

"Myrtle?"

As suddenly as that the ghost was across the room from where she'd been floating before, having popped from place to place as though apparated. Shaking off the strange sensation, she'd then gone on with her lesson.

But the point had been proved.

Luna was the wrinkle (and how often was that the case?). Snape was not the only person who kept a catalog of hairs of people who had gone to Hogwarts. Luna had suspected the Headbastard had also, and she was right. He had so many things they'd taken they really ought to catalog them sometime, even though that effort would doubtless take years. But she had gone right to the magical specimens chest that included hairs of just about every teacher or student Hogwarts had, almost since Dumbledore's first days as a teacher.

Plucking out a hair from Myrtle from before she'd died, she'd charged some polyjuice with it and given that to Harry to administer to one of the dementor kissed bodies.

So when they'd then summoned the spirit with three turns of Harry's ring, her new body even looked like home. Even if that had no other benefit, the expression of joy in Myrtle's eyes was well worth the effort.

While her subsequent creation as a dryad was in no way a letdown, it did not compare to the first light of her eyes over the delight of that initial moment, seeing her own body (or so she supposed) laying there - alive!

And, since no one else was using that body at the moment, it became hers in short order. Harry cast the spells causing her to possess it, and they dosed her with the cordial to make that permanent. After which she'd immediately glomped the boy and proclaimed her everlasting gratitude with tears in her eyes. It was a wonder that she ever let him go, but her transformation then kicked in, and despite how hard she'd tried to hold onto him during every second of it, that was simply impossible as she got recreated.

Luna suspected they almost didn't need the Unctuous Unction she'd made Harry slip in there after the Polyjuice but before summoning the ghost. But precautions (and that's all this was) worked best when generally applied.

Feelings were fickle things, and eternal gratitude wasn't. She might be mind-bogglingly grateful now, but after a few hundreds years, that would have had a chance to mellow out a trifle.

Best not to doubt her then by being incautious now.

Having carefully gone over the Diadem of Ravenclaw, Luna found one of the hairs of the last living owner, and charged a dose of polyjuice for Helena Ravenclaw, The Gray Lady, Ghost of Ravenclaw House, the same way.

Here, Harry insisted, "She must have Dumbledore's body. That one's got the strongest magical core by far, and she's not only Ravenclaw's daughter, she's got a thousand years of watching this school, helping Ravenclaws study all that while. There is no one on Earth I'd trust to have more knowledge of magic than Dumbledore, except her. And we need that knowledge backed by the biggest core we can arrange, so it can be put to the most use for us."

And, really, what could be said in opposition to that? They generally agreed, and he dosed the Headmaster's soulless body with the ancient Ravenclaw's polyjuice, granting that ghost almost an identical experience of hysterical joy as the first to be brought back that way.

"You wouldn't happen to have defied Dumbledore three times, would you?" Susan asked, when the ghost arrived and after the initial weepy joy had run out (probably due to the fact that she was wrapped around Harry and no one had tried to disturb her from this post of supreme comfort).

"Why do you ask?" The embodied specter was puzzled, and asked over his shoulder, mind still afire over having the sensation of TOUCH again!

"Well," Susan smiled. "He is a dark lord, and you are marked his equal in a very real and magical sense. I mean, you have identical magical cores!"

"That prophecy was made up," Sybil the dryad told them.

"Yes," Susan agreed. "But that doesn't mean they don't sometimes take on a life of their own. And she is about to be 'born' a dryad." She held up the as-yet-untaken dose of cordial to demonstrate.

"Well, in that case it would be us who'd need to have defied him," Harry told her out of the fortress of Helena's arms with a contemplative look on his face. "Because she is, in a way, being 'born to' those who have thrice defied him."

"No, I think we've already defied him more than that." Susan shook her head.

"Immaterial. If someone has defied you thrice, he's also defied you twice, and first had to defy you once. So if we've three or more acts of defiance down, we're covered." Harry smiled. "And I think we've got plenty."

"So, if that matters, we're set." Susan nodded firmly. "What about 'as the seventh month dies' part?"

Harry shrugged. "Seventh from what? Seventh from the date the prophecy was given? Seventh in order? Seventh by name? Those are different, you know. September means 'seventh month' even though it comes ninth on the calendar. Or for that matter what calendar are we talking about? Or are we even talking about one? It could be the seventh month during which a phoenix dies, assuming only seven have truly died since their creation. Or it could be counting from just about any starting point imaginable. The meaning could be totally arbitrary because it comes without context. I could just as easily stand here and declare that seven months ago today something special must have happened - because today that prophecy is coming true."

He shook his head. "No, if you want to talk predictions, give me an honest 'Troy will not fall unless...' type or leave me alone. The predictive riddles are so much garbage they may as well not be given."

"Finally! Oh, at long last!" Helena accepted the dryad cordial, but her eyes were not on it. She pointed with the vial to the newly arrived Hermione and insisted, "Now you must be my mother. You promised!"

Hermione didn't remember saying any such thing, but meekly said, "Ok."

Her parents blinked, still in shock over that whole park thing.

With that Helena Ravenclaw quaffed the cordial, getting transformed into a stately apple, which amused Harry because if one was to pick one tree in all the world to have, apple would have been his choice, as they simply had no end of uses! More recipes used it than any other fruit. It seemed like half the baked goods in the world could be made of apple. It was, to his mind, the King of Fruits (or queen, as the case may be) and the wood wasn't bad either.

Although the hair of their newest dryad was very familiar, and Harry had to check to make sure. Yup! The same as Hermione, which was the same as her mother. So somehow the Fairy Queen decided that agreement was binding.

How or why could wait for later.

Queen Alice of Wonderland chose that moment to pop out of the mirror still leaned up against Sybil's tree. "Hurry! Hurry, hurry!" the apparent seven year old proclaimed, bouncing around in a great deal of excitement. She put a briefcase in Sybil's hands and began to shove her towards the lake. "The muggle world is about to end. It was always going to, but sooner now than later because their web of lies cannot take the truth. So you must hurry!"

"What's going on?" Harry stood up from where Helena had knocked him down to cuddle him.

Alice had no time or patience for questions, but answered anyway as she shoved at Sybil. "They are about to discover what you haven't done yet, so you must be on your way to do it, or else all things will fall out of order. It's too late to do it now, and won't be acceptable unless it's done back then, so go do it."

Hermione had an odd look on her face as she proclaimed, "God help me, but I think I understood that."

"Sounded perfectly rational to me," Luna calmly accepted.

"That's the problem," Hermione worried. The eyes of her parents crossed.

Harry was pretty sure he'd understood it too. "Alright, if she's going back now, then..." He looked around, striding over towards her tree, he pulled a magical knapsack out of hiding behind the mirror leaning up against it. "I will prepare this in a little while with all of the notes of things I could remember, then come back and hide it here."

Hermione's parents fainted.

Harry continued as though nothing odd had happened. "And since what I think Alice might be talking about has something to do with whatever we were going to hire the muggles to do to hide our race, we'll go to the banks and convert drug cartels' savings into a hundred tons of gold for Sybil to take back with her. That will be in here too."

He went and decisively fastened the pack to the oracle's shoulders.

"Include your house-sized variant of the bubble-head charm as well." The Queen's sleepy voice mumbled.

"I'm not complaining, but could you help me to understand why?" he asked while he fought to soothe the dryad so he could adjust the straps.

There came a long, drawn out non-sigh. "Many times I have lost dryads to volcanic eruptions, and not always to the fires they spawn.

Some are scorched to death by the invisible clouds of acidic, poisonous gas, others buried under tons of deposited ash. I would like to avoid those, if I could."

"Right. " Harry nodded. "So I'll include that too. Goodbye."

Sybil Trelawney vanished in a cloud of sparkles as the Fairy Queen whisked her through time, then fell asleep from the effort. They could all feel her presence vanish from the glade.

Harry turned back to the bodies on the ground. "Well, nothing for it but to continue on with what we were doing."

"Luna," Hermione asked as she struggled to get her parents settled on the lawn more comfortably. "Why was it necessary to bring my parents?"

The blonde cocked her head as though it was obvious. "Why, so Harry can turn them into a witch and wizard, of course. They could never survive the upcoming wars otherwise."

Hermione felt a chill go up and down her spine.

Harry had already allocated two of the spiritually dead, magically alive bodies to that purpose. Voldemort's various resurrection rituals covered things he might use to adapt to that purpose. But that could easily involve destroying and then recreating their bodies, and he didn't want to make any mistakes.

If Luna said it was needful, he didn't even question that anymore.

But it was going to take some doing. Rolling up his sleeves about to get to work, he decided to delegate some of his other tasks. "Right. That means we've got two more bodies to be used for ghosts. Any suggestions?" His gaze speared the two former specters, as they'd been in that community and were most likely to know.

Helena answered without hesitation. "Two spirits Dumbledore summoned on occasion, sending other ghosts to fetch so he could consult (they never appeared without coaxing, being exceptionally

shy specters) were Merope Gaunt and Ariana Dumbledore - the sister that he killed. If you are fighting him, those are two good allies to have."

"Right." Glancing first to Susan and Hannah (whom he judged in an instant as not up to that level yet), then Hermione (whom he felt had a right to be involved in the transformation of her parents), he handed the appropriate book on possession spells to Luna, gave her two vials, and pointed her at the remaining bodies. "Not all powers in this world are physical, or even magical. Merope Gaunt is Voldemort's mother, while his murdered sister may be Albus Dumbledore's only emotional weak point. Having them on our side may not be a bad idea. Bring them back to life for us, will you?"

Luna got right on it.

Harry turned back to face Hermione's prone parents with a grim expression on his face, prompting the girl to ask, "What is it?"

Still focused, he replied, "Hermione, if it were easy to steal magical cores then no pureblood would ever be suffered to go on as a squib. Heck, if it were POSSIBLE to steal magic then no muggleborn would ever be permitted to go to school so long as they had 'more worthy' hosts to transfer their power to! This is among the most daring and dangerous new fields..."

Queen Alice hopped by, grabbing both prone parents and the bodies they lay by, dragging them all into her mirror after her, tossing them back out a moment later along with a cry of, "Done!"

Harry tried to wipe the gobsmacked expression from off his face. Hermione rushed to go wake up her parents. While she did so he turned to command his other dryads, "Aurora, go get Madam Rosemerta. She's well placed to spy on the school and all that goes on there, which makes me suspect she's already one of Dumbledore's agents. So go offer her a chance to switch sides and become a dryad. Minerva, go collect those Order members you recommended to me: Emmaline Vance and Hestia Jones, right?"

He paused to collect his thoughts for a moment. "Okay. Our 'original twenty' dryads will all be tasked with finding four more suitable girls each. Since Merope Gaunt and Ariana Dumbledore are shy ghosts, I don't know that they know anyone - and if they did they'd be dead anyway, and we've just run out of fresh bodies with magical cores. Since they won't give us useful recruits we just won't count those as among our original twenty, even if Luna learns those spells faster than I think she will and they get done earlier than some others. That leaves us three more to pick. Any suggestions?"

"Don't forget Bathilda Bagshot, she has information we need," Hermione reminded him.

"Right. Two left." His eyes scanned the remaining crowd.

Minerva spoke, "Miranda Goshawk, charms mistress and author of Standard Books of Spells. Also Griselda Marchbanks, elder on the Wizengamot, and Head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority." The young redheaded Scot gave a small quirk of her lips. "She gave Albus his OWL tests."

Harry gave a sharp nod of his head. "Right. Done. We've got our twenty. I'll leave it to you, Minerva, to approach those two, since you're all in educational circles together, you'll probably have the easiest approach."

The Deputy Headmistress nodded. "I shall. Also, with your permission, I shall take as two of my four Galatea Merrythought, a former professor of DADA, and Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank, a former Care of Magical Creatures Professor who still substitutes for us on occasion."

Harry remembered the former. She'd taught up until 1945, and been Riddle's Defense Against The Dark Arts instructor. Oh yeah! She was qualified. "I like it. Everyone else, get who you can, but try not to break up couples. Let's try to have this done by sundown. Bring everyone you can here for their cordials, as not only are the conversions fun to watch, but their initial trees ought to be as secure as possible, especially before we take cuttings."

Accepting their instructions, all of his dryads went on their ways, some to collect colleagues or old classmates, others focusing more on relatives, but most seeking out past and present students - because, as teachers, that's most of who they knew.

Minerva left, concealing a smile. Between the present female Hogwarts staff, plus Galatea Merrythought on DADA and Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank on Care of Magical Creatures, Myrtle teaching History of Magic and Miranda Goshawk on Charms, they only needed Potions to cover all subjects taught at Hogwarts among the dryads themselves. Add a caretaker and a groundskeeper and they'd have an entire staff!

And did not the Fairy Queen send Sybil off to rescue Harry's parents? Lily would be an ideal Professor of Potions, very knowledgeable of her subject, yet kind and personable to the students. One of the better Head Girls the school had ever had, really.

It might not mean anything in the end, but it made Minerva happy thinking of it, and she left the clearing wondering who she could select to serve as the two vacant slots, just in case that should be needed.

It was only natural that people select their choices from the fields that interested them. Over there Narcissa and Bellatrix Black were discussing who to choose among the unmarried purebloods, just as Emmaline and Hestia would doubtless be interested in bringing on fellow Order members.

That would all be to the good, granting them a well rounded spy ring.

Minerva noted, with amusement, that Rolanda was trying to convince Aurora to go in with her on collecting the entire Holyhead Harpies quidditch team! She idly wondered, if they succeeded, should they change the name of the team to the Dorchester Dryads?

No, that would only give things away.

Harry settled down to make his record notes on the last war so he could spin back and hide that for Trelawney, while Hermione woke

her parents and got them to agree to make the bank transfers from cash to gold.

And, since it was all going to be muggle banks, places where the fae dared not go for fear of destroying them, having her parents around to do that for them turned out to be A Needful Thing.

Especially as none of their dryads were what she'd call competent in the muggle world. Not for this type of high level transaction, anyway.

Still, Hermione was already thinking ahead as to what books she had to buy to give her parents a magical education. Thinking they'd need it soon.

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With the Queen's permission, Sybil Trelawney smirked as she took the Time Turner Luna let her borrow and spun back one day, disappearing from among her crowd of friends in a shower of sparkles.

She had some errands to perform before she went back thirty years. Things she didn't want to forget. Most of what Harry wanted her to add, Beautifying Elixir and wit-sharpening potions and what not, were available in shops and she could simply buy samples of them.

It would cost her a pretty penny, nor would they be the permanent versions he'd planned to create for himself, but (seeing as Dumbledore never let her leave her tower) she had the gold saved up, and the cordial itself would make them permanent.

No, that was a simple thing to do now, but it would get it off of her agenda, clearing up her attention to focus on more important tasks.

She didn't know why certain people had forgotten the potion she got in the beginning was a part of the altered mix. Luna gave the original dose to Alice on day one, Alice took it to them on the day they'd just been in, then took one of the altered doses back to the past for Sybil to use in the first place!

That meant Sybil enjoyed all of the changes to that mix: Bride's Delight, the reproductive enhancer, the suite of protective potions, and all.

And she had a hair of Harry's she was going to slip into a certain pink potion while Luna was asleep.

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Author's Notes:

As we have watched the end of one major corporation after another, banks failing and frauds being exposed on every level of government, or any other concern, war being threatened (or declared) in every part of the globe, and every type of crisis growing beyond all previous proportions, for purposes of this story, I choose to interpret that, and the failing of many world currencies (including powerful indications that the dollar may be collapsing for good) as the coming end of the muggle world.

Like Rome, we are falling. And like Rome, it is under the weight of our own corruption.

And once more like Rome, when it goes so much of what we consider ordinary will stop working that many may well interpret it as the end of the world. And indeed, it will be the end of one style of living.

But you add any kind of stress (like the discovery of fairies) to an already torn fabric (or fabric of society, in this case) and it rips faster.

Chapter Seventy-One

by Lionheart

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Sybil Trelawney stepped into the past, glad for how natural the whole thing seemed. She even arrived with an approximate sense of when she was. Let's see, Harry was thirteen years old when she'd left him. His parents had him when they were twenty...

So, thirty years into the past meant Harry's parents were now three years old.

Simple, right?

The dryad drew her wand, noting idly the disgusting dead/oily feel to it and silently wishing they had a wand-crafter in the family already. She'd approach Ollivander, except with his 'wand chooses the wizard' mania, even if she could convince him to make a wand out of her materials, he'd put it on his shelves with the rest and wait for it to choose some snot-nosed eleven-year-old rather than just give it back to her.

And frankly, she wasn't anxious to see the next Dark Lord to arise using her wood as his wand. How mortified Fawkes had to have been to have his feather casting all of those killing curses!

No, Trelawney wanted none of that. Ollivander wouldn't be getting close to any of her wood, if she could possibly help it. Even if that meant waving around this stick of dead tissue.

At least it still worked, no matter how disgusting it felt.

Sybil raised the wand and said, "Point Me, Lily Evans!"

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When she'd walked into the neighborhood to find the Evans family she had not expected to find a miniature Severus Snape at the park there as well.

She'd been on staff with him. She knew the disgusting little turd of a man better than most, having had to listen to him ridicule the students (not just Harry) and bully around those weaker than him (which, with the Headmaster at his back, was just about everybody) his entire term on staff.

Anytime he got called on any of his outrageous acts of cruelty he'd cry, "Oh, poor me! I have been wronged!" conveniently ignoring the fact that he was constantly doing worse to others than he'd ever claimed to have suffered - and he did it to those who'd never done him wrong as much as those who did.

No, his whining and put upon air that others had wronged him was as pathetic as a man who'd embezzled millions crying that a vendor had short-changed him a dime.

It was rather like Draco Malfoy insulting a hippogriff, getting a scratch, then carrying on as though he'd innocently suffered a near-mortal wound without any provocation, and insisting the beast get killed as a menace in retaliation.

She didn't know why that example sprang to mind, since as far as she knew the little Malfoy cretin had never attended a Care of Magical Creature class. But the comparison sprang strongly to mind anyway.

Sybil almost raised her wand to kill the creepy little snot before he could grow up into the murdering terror he'd later become, when something inside warned her not to. Just like looking at a gulf you could tell it was too far to jump across. She was a fairy creature, and those had an odd relationship with time, and while changing her own past was not unreasonable, this would be too great a point of diversion for her powers to cover.

Perhaps if she was more powerful, but right now that was not the case. So, disappointed, she lowered her wand, gazing at the Snape family as the tall, hook nosed muggle bullied his witch of a wife.

She knew the type. It was actually fairly common. A pureblood princess thinks to get out of the dark rut her family is in, and so marries a muggle. But she doesn't know his world and he doesn't know hers, and every so often it was the case that neither one takes the transition well.

She'd heard stories about this type of relationship. In fact, she'd heard THIS story! Not long after the witch had divorced her abusive husband, changed her name and moved to France to start over, Snape had been raving about the castle for weeks, months even.

Naturally, like any dangerous animal, there was something of a 'Snape-alert' going on among the faculty that he bullied, and any dangerous mood was a cause for concern, so the reasons for it had to be analyzed and talked about. So Trelawney was very well informed of the specifics of this situation.

This was almost a worst-case scenario. Usually being magical was enough of an advantage for a witch to control the muggle in her relationship when necessary and keep things from getting too far out of hand. But this muggle was obviously clever enough to have figured out what the Statute for Secrecy meant for his marriage - so long as they were in public, or had uninformed muggles about, she couldn't do anything, and he was in charge.

So he'd taken to carrying the family out of the house a disproportionate amount of time, always in muggle neighborhoods, keeping them in public where she couldn't use magic to defend herself or improve his mood, or even just see that he obeyed basic rules of propriety!

He also brought friends over, often inviting them to stay the night, so they had no privacy even in that cramped little house of theirs. All so that he could stay the one in charge, and he was mean-tempered and foul enough that when he was in charge those around him suffered. He didn't even have the excuse of being a drunk. No, he was just a petty, small-minded bully.

Unfortunately, the muggle friends he made were very much like him in that. He chose the types to invite home who would not remark on him beating his wife for her imagined transgressions against him.

Odd, how very like his own father Severus was.

And then he'd gone and blamed his behavior on others - just like his father! If he could even imagine up the slightest excuse, you were to blame, not he!

Still, the case of his mother was a sad one. Once a proud, accomplished student, captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones team, now reduced to this. It was just exactly this sort of treatment that added the most fuel to the fires of muggle-hating purebloods, and it did not encourage more pureblood maids to attempt defecting from the dark ranks of their ancestors, either.

Just then a thought crossed Sybil's mind, and she smiled. It was what the woman was going to do anyway, what was the harm in seeing it done a little early? Snape's mother had to be given some credit for not going dark like her family and becoming a Death Eater like her son, given how much reason she had to hate muggles!

No, she'd truly tried to overcome her past, and not be embittered by her initial failures. That had to be worth a reward.

Proudly, Sybil cast a Notice-Me-Not charm keyed to muggles on herself, walked over to where the tall, hook-nosed bully was crowding his skinny wife, speaking heatedly in angry tones, promptly grabbed his arm...

... and tore it out of its socket.

Ok, Trelawney admitted to herself she'd gotten a little angry herself there, and only recently had become roughly as strong as a troll. Something to watch out for in the future, she decided, right before backhanding the man across the face with his own arm, sending him skidding off through some bushes. She then dropped the appendage in a nearby waste receptacle.

Turning back to his wife, Sybil told her, "Divorce that waste of flesh, go to France, and start your life over. He's not worth putting up with more of this. And his son will be his mirror image - they could shave by each other!"

Such was the awful treatment she'd received that the woman did not even argue, nor did Sybil have to use magic. The former Eileen Prince just put down her diaper bag and walked away, stopping by her house only briefly to magically pack her belongings and go, never once looking back.

Sybil smirked. Now at least without his mother around he'd have no access to magic, which meant Severus would not start Hogwarts knowing more curses on his first day than half the seventh years did on graduation!

Three year old Severus then kicked her in the shin.

Looking down on the little weed, knowing the awful creature he'd turn into, and all the harm he'd cause not only to those around him but to their whole world, Sybil bravely resisted the temptation to put him under Imperio to go and roast his balls in his mother's waffle iron. At least that way there wouldn't be any more of him around.

There is a reason why fairies have a reputation for cruelty when provoked. And frankly he'd done worse to muggles during his days as a Death Eater. Heck, from what she'd recently learned, he'd done worse to muggleborn witches and wizards while serving as a teacher at Hogwarts!

No, he was lucky he got off with a Eternally Runny Nose curse.

She was a dryad. She would be a dryad whether her tree was on an island, underground, or even up in space somewhere. Perhaps it was because they spent so much time transforming things, but fae did not believe the essential nature of something could be easily changed. She had seen bad men born to good families, and good men born to bad ones, each one asserting their own character over and in spite of the influence of their environment. She had witnessed abused students bravely overcome their backgrounds to become good

people. And she'd seen those like Severus who wallowed in it, holding up their abuse as an excuse, a license to get away with anything they wanted to, almost a badge of glory, taking a peculiar and revolting form of pleasure out of inflicting their own misery on everyone else around them.

As opposed to Harry on the other end of the spectrum, a lad who took real abuse and was still as nice as anything.

But Severus was still a kid, and though she felt certain that his course was set, that he would inevitably become the same horrid man she'd left behind in the future, as yet he was still innocent.

And the fairy prized innocence. It was so fleeting!

Having enough of this distraction, the dryad started across the park to where the Evans family was at play, removing the notice-me-not charm as she went.

Shortly afterward she was introducing herself to Joan and Edmund Evans, Lily's parents, who'd been watching their five and three year old daughters play together in the park, screened by bushes from what had happened back on the other side, so totally ignorant of the man bleeding in the bushes.

Sybil had never intended to kill the man, she'd meant to spin him around to face her but misjudged her new strength, but neither was she going to exert herself to save his life. If someone found him and he lived, fine. If not, well that was fine by her too.

The man had, in his own way, been a substantial contributor to the death and misery in the wizarding world over the course of a nasty war. And she wasn't about to spare a Nazi who'd trained others to run the gas furnaces at prison camps just because he hadn't fired a shot on the front lines!

No, because of him, or rather his behaviors and attitudes reflected through his son, people she'd known and loved had died.

He could save his own life, if it was worth saving!

No, right now she had some very important convincing to do with the parents of the future Lily Potter, and time waits for no one!

Well, unless you are a fairy. Then Time will not only wait, but do backflips and handstands to entertain you while you are busy!

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"So, are you new to the area?" Joan Evans asked the nice young woman they had met in the park.

"Yes, new to everything, actually," Sybil admitted, looking around herself.

"Oh?" Joan stood straighter. "Are you new to the country? But you speak English so well. Surely you're not American? I can't detect an accent."

"No, not new to the country," Sybil explained. "I've just lived in a castle in Scotland for the last fourteen years, and a small community before that."

"Was it haunted?" Edmund asked, joking (or so he thought).

"Yes, but we had some exterminators by. They cleaned out the spooks and specters nicely," Sybil agreed, unknowing that Lily's father thought she was just playing along with his joke.

"So what brings you to our area?" Joan inquired.

"A couple things," the oracle admitted. "I just helped a distant cousin escape from her abusive marriage." A VERY distant cousin, but all purebloods were related. A twinkle then entered Sybil's eyes, and she said, "And I am hoping to hire a couple representatives to take my proposal before some interested parties..."

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Joan Evans smiled at the NASA representative as she was led into his office. She continued smiling as she was led into a plush seat. "Hello. As I told your secretary, I represent an eccentric botanist. It is this person's desire to see each of these delivered to the surface of the appropriate planet."

She opened a briefcase containing a rather large amount of foam cushioning nine golden acorns, each about the size of a pint jar, each also marked with the Greek symbols for the planets, from Mercury to Pluto, with the spot for Earth instead filled by one marked with a symbol of the moon.

Joan fought a smirk that she, ordinary everyday Joan Evans, mother of two and until a few days ago a common British housewife, should be working with people on this level. But money talks! "And she is willing to pay ten billion dollars American for each one successfully delivered, half in advance. Twice that if they are in space and under way in the next three years."

Of course, after Sybil had proven to them that magic was real and explained to them that their daughter was a witch (she HAD training for introducing a muggleborn's family to their world, even though she'd never used it before) everything had taken on interesting overtones.

It explained why she'd needed people familiar with dealing with the mundane world for serving as her contact to these agencies, after all.

Joan set forth a sheet detailing their characteristics, exact size, mass and weight of the acorns for the NASA representative. The most interesting details were not in there, however. Joan had had to have it explained to her that these acorns were gold leaf over wood, oak, to be precise, and would register on tests as lightweight and hollow, but were actually magical trunks. A demonstration of those to the muggle family had been mind-boggling! However, not even Joan knew these were made of Trelawney's oak (and thus, like her, immune to heat and flame) and covered in enough charms to equal the protections of a horcrux.

So they would likely survive such dangers as atmospheric entry, they were even unlikely to be harmed by such things as crash landings or catastrophic fuel failures leading to explosions of the launch vehicle.

Each was also enchanted with most of the same spells as on a bludger, only instead of seeking out Quidditch players they would seek the planet whose rune was carved on them. In short, they would provide their own propulsion and guidance in cases where it became necessary. Along with the plotting calculations programmed in. Someone just had to get them up into space and they'd eventually reach their targets.

Each was also filled with tiny viable cuttings from each of one hundred dryad trees, currently held in suspended animation by the Queen's own casting of that anti-wilting charm Harry'd discovered, and a small golem would pop out of the trunk and begin planting them on arrival.

Someone had also thoughtfully provided the golden coating warded to contain most of the magic inside until it was opened. Between that and the passive, quiescent and slumbering nature of most of the magic, and it was hoped they wouldn't interfere with the muggle delivery vehicles too badly. Not even the bludger enchantments would activate unless the vehicle went off-course.

So long as things went alright and the vehicle was on course, the magic should slumber peacefully inside and not bother anything, well, any more than background traces usually did. But a wand tucked in someone's back pocket did not stop traffic, nor fritz out electric watches. It was only if things went wrong that magic would step in and correct the problem.

Her husband, Edmund Evans, was even now approaching the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency. Whoever promised the earliest launch date would get the program.

The Evans did not know this, but Alice of Wonderland had provided the acorns from a future even beyond that which Trelawney had come back from, and they were fully loaded not only with dryad

shoots and hedge cuttings, but a small shrine to the Fairy Queen ready to be deployed on contact with their new planets.

Between magically provided water and light, inherent bubble-head charms of the house-sized variety to survive a lack of atmosphere, featherlight charms to survive too-heavy gravity, and deep sea exploration charms for surviving crushing pressure, they could survive anywhere in the solar system - or at the very least it was their intention to find out if they could or not. Also, this meant their dryads, who shared those charms, could survive hard vacuum.

So not only was a fairy shrine nearly impregnable to start with, simply crossing the distance to assault one ought to be outside of Dumbledore's power forever!

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"10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1... we have liftoff!"

Sybil watched from a safe distance as the massive Saturn V rocket roared, filling the world below it with a pillar of flames.

It was really rather pretty.

They'd come out with the design more than a year ahead of schedule and were beating her three year time limit by a matter of days, but they were coming in under that limit.

Under the Sputnik crisis, they'd do anything to get into space, and didn't much care what she wanted sent, only where. Heck, for twenty billion dollars they would have sent a pair of the US President's underpants to the moon! With the President still in them!

Especially since the space race was going that way anyway.

She had reached a compromise with NASA, and they would be launching her other missions within the next couple of months, as launch windows opened. The Venus probe had actually been sent last year. The mission to Mars the year before that. Other launch vehicles were already completed, along with a couple of spares. As

far as they were concerned her project was paying them to do the missions they'd wanted to do anyway, reaching for goals more ambitious than they otherwise would have dared reach for at this stage (landings instead of flybys).

Further missions, carrying many times the instrumentation, were already planned, as these few had barely accomplished much beyond bragging rights of 'we got here'. But they HAD gotten there. Muggles continually surprised her with their ingenuity, and if they wanted to follow-up with more cameras and measuring devices she could not even pronounce the names of, they were welcome to. They were certainly excited enough about it.

The Moon mission had actually been delayed, as while it was the closest and therefore the easiest to reach, they'd wanted to accomplish more than essentially hitting another planet with a bullet (one that soft-landed and sent back pictures, but still a bullet).

This time they'd hoped to be up there to place the acorn by hand. Sadly, it was not going to happen. They'd had to scrap those plans as too ambitious. A manned moon landing was still years away.

Still, it was truly amazing what vast amounts of money could get people to do. They'd had resources none of them had ever dreamed of available for this, and the mission was taking place sooner than many had dared hope for. This probe was going to be its own radio controlled vehicle, the first of its kind to land on any extraterrestrial body.

It wasn't quite as good as a manned mission, but those were coming soon. Already various parties were bidding on the return of her acorns, as if that would be the next, best goal of the space race.

It wasn't going to happen.

Sybil had already transported herself to her cloned oak trees on Mars and Venus, and they stood within vast gardens of similar trees, representing the other dryads and cuttings taken by the small golem duplicating them all. The house sized variants of the bubble head charms and other measures to protect against extreme environments

(and it was clear to her, whatever point in the future Alice had brought those seedlings back from, they'd all been through the fire protection ritual by then) had so far proven sufficient on those comparatively gentle planets.

Time and experimentation would only prove if that was so on harsher worlds. She didn't worry about Mercury. The only problem there was the heat (which they were immune to) and the velocity of the impact vehicle (which ought to be well within what the magically strengthened acorn could tolerate). Lack of pressure was not turning out to be a problem for their charms, so the Moon was no concern either. It would succeed. However, Trelawney had to admit she had no comprehension of the pressures involved in those gas giants. The spells had shown no difficulty when she had explored the bottoms of the very deepest ocean trenches here on Earth, but time would tell.

However to date those acorns that had landed had served their function well, and seeing as how they now occupied places of honor in the center of new fairy shrines, no muggle was getting close to recover them, now or ever. The transplanted hedge alone was enough to see to that! They'd be lucky to even catch a glimpse of the greenhouses being constructed there.

Didn't mean they probably wouldn't have fun trying, however. They were already two-thirds of the way done with a space station in orbit around the Earth they were going to occupy as a staging point in many future missions.

It was 1966, five more years until Voldemort first began his rise to power, but Trelawney had to admit her work on this project was done. She'd hadn't even had to do all that much, honestly, just pay the muggles, give them a goal, and set them on their way. Oh, and let them take a few pictures of her standing next to launch vehicles, holding acorns, or shaking astronauts and scientists by the hand. Trivial really, but a welcome distraction all the same.

Oh, and they'd wanted her to give some silly speeches when handing over the massive piles of gold they'd earned. Luckily, the Evans family had been wise enough to hire some speech writers for her, and

together with a little bit of coaching, that had been enough to pull her through those occasions.

Didn't excuse any of those dratted newspapers from calling her any of those dratted names like 'mother of space exploration' or 'star queen' or any such nonsense, however!

Ok, it had changed her perspective on Astronomy a little, and she read the stars differently now, having been to two of them (and oddly enough, this had markedly increased the accuracy of some of her non-oracular readings). Being outside of the protected zones around the trees felt weird, but she could live through it. She was only an aspect of her tree, after all, and her tree was now well warded and protected against that sort of threat.

Therefore, so was she. Didn't stop it from feeling odd, however, to stand out on the soil of a dead planet and stare up into naked space, a festive garden of light and air and joy only a few steps behind her back.

But the silly excuses these muggles came up with to honor people! They didn't even KNOW about any of the IMPORTANT parts, the reasons behind those missions!

Which reason was, naturally enough, the preservation of the fairy race by giving them sanctuaries well outside the reach of any wizard. But then, put that way, she couldn't exactly tell them that, could she?

It was a secret, after all. It's a big part of what made them so safe. I mean, who would even think to look for them there? And better yet, when the present muggle society fell, as Queen Alice said it would, even the muggles would lose the ability to go there. So if they stayed a secret long enough, Dumbledore could not even do what they'd done and hire muggles to get something of his to these secret gardens.

That put them well and truly beyond his reach.

Still, it was time to turn her full attention to her other concerns. She had put less than her full efforts into recreating that ancient witch's

work on those experimental magical herbs that gave Rapunzel her power. Experiments had been proceeding, but she'd not devoted to them the attention they deserved. Now it was time to shift focus, as she had to succeed before Voldemort's rise, as after he began his reign of terror she would no longer have the time!

She had a great deal to learn, not just about these experiments, but studies she'd neglected during her schooling and also notes sent back by Harry. The space projects would either succeed or fail on their own now, and there was very little she could do either way on the subject. Now was the time for her to devote herself fully to preparing for the upcoming war, and that included working her pert bottom off rediscovering the secrets of Rampion Elixir.

Thankfully, the Potters, Harry's other grandparents, had been just as helpful as the Evans family was being, in preparing the other side of her mission back and getting things ready for Voldemort's rise.

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Author's Notes:

Once more, this chapter got away from me a little there. I was going to lay some hints about things, but the whole tale of this particular sidestory arc just got laid out in detail and there was nothing I could do to stop it!

Yes, what Alice was referring to the muggles finding out about was the many planetary landings that hadn't happened yet, so Trelawney had to go back and do them.

Or else things would fall out of order, and you couldn't have that!

Originally they would have made the discoveries of those groves of trees quite by accident, and by telescope. However she has invigorated the space program enough that may well be done now by follow-up missions and landers looking for the very specific sites of the previous missions.

Gotta love those muggles.

As for Snape, let me tell you one of the prime reasons why I despise that character. Because I have every excuse he does to be a horrible person. I had a father who was physically, emotionally and verbally abusive, and not just a little in either case. I had a bad home life, and I was bullied at school, more bullied than any other kid I knew then or now.

But you know what? I overcame it. I grew past it. I didn't let it control my life. Sure it was bad, extreme in cases. I still bear scars from some of it. But I chose to be a better person than that.

Snape on the other hand made no effort to overcome his. Believe me - I know every sign of what getting over such a background requires, and he's never so much as started to make that effort. Instead, he revels in it. He uses it as his excuse to hurt others, "I have been wronged, therefore I am right in wronging others."

Believe me, I've seen that type too. He, and others like him, just spread the suffering. They use their background as an excuse. He hides behind it, even glories in it, because for him it's an excuse that can never run out - he can always still say "Oh, I was WRONGED! I have a RIGHT to wrong others!"

And because of people like him the abuse goes on to another generation. And because Dumbledore made him a teacher, it goes on not just to any kids he might have, but to who knows how many others.

People like Snape are contagious. They deliberately pass it on to the next generation whenever and wherever they can. And Dumbledore ought to be hung for allowing him the opportunity for spreading it as far as he did.

Take it from one who knows. Because if that sort of thing is allowed to go on unchecked, then no child would be allowed to grow up without being abused.

But stupid, stupid fans love Snape over Harry, who coincidentally was also abused and had a bad home life, and was bullied at school (by

people under Snape's protection) and despite it all chose to be a decent guy.

And fan girls giggle together over how they'd like to bear Snape's love child (and use characters from the books as their proxies to do so) ignoring the fact that he'd beat them - just like his father beat his mother.

After all, he was wronged. He has a right to take that out on others.

Chapter Seventy-Two
by Lionheart

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Even before taking her offer before the various space agencies, Edmund Evans had pointed out to his sponsor, "You know, they're going to want to see the money before they commit to anything, don't you?"

Sybil had shrugged. "I honestly don't see how that is going to be a problem."

"Okay, but even if you do have it, they're going to want to know where you got it," Edmund had continued. "No one is that rich."

"Why should that matter?" The oracle had honestly been puzzled as she looked up from where Lily and Petunia played around her feet.

Joan had stepped in and offered, "The muggle world is full of accountants. They feel very strongly about wanting to know where money comes from, and where it goes."

"Mostly so they can tax it," Edmund had grumbled. His salary as an office worker was not as high as he'd like, but it kept having uncomfortable chunks ripped out of it by the revenue service.

"Can't I just say I found it?" Sybil had wondered innocently.

Edmund had barked a laugh, shaking his head. "No. They tax 'found' money even more than they do what you earn! You'd lose ninety percent of it or more, depending on where you said you found it and who had jurisdiction. Some governments are more greedy than others."

Sybil had then thought back on Harry's example. "Well then, I don't see why I can't be my own government."

Edmund and Joan's jaws had dropped at the suggestion.

They'd been no less amazed when she'd gone ahead and done it.

It really is no problem for a resourceful person to take over a small country about the size of a Super Wal-Mart. You approach whoever is in charge, pay them enough to make their eyes bulge, and they walk away wealthier than when they were king, while you hold the keys of government.

Simple, straightforward, a little tactless, but honest and legal. Corporations had been bought and sold much the same, and it wasn't much different in practice for countries.

So Trelawney had bought herself a small cluster of anonymous Caribbean islands, declared herself queen, and then a few months later 'found' a large Spanish treasure fleet sunken inside of her waters. Taking every bit of that gold for herself, of course.

Her eccentric botanist story was that she'd been exploring the sea floor on some dives investigating native flora when she'd made the discovery. Any rumors that she'd found the gold before buying the country, and that was why and how she'd bought the place, were politely ignored by genteel parties.

She'd then gone ahead and let the natives run the government pretty much the same as before she'd taken over, and gone to pay for a space program.

Meanwhile, back around her previously anonymous islands, divers had begun to appear in marvelous profusion, exploring her sea floor for miles around, and they even began finding things, much to Trelawney's surprise. However, to her amusement, her government did almost reflexively tax them, so she got a substantial chunk out of those discoveries.

Interestingly enough, when you are a small, insignificant and unarmed nation who has larger, well-armed and belligerent neighbors, your best defense is not to have anything they want. And, with golden treasures being pulled out of her waters all of the time, she no longer had that.

Still stinging from having been made to back down during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Cuba decided to regain some prestige (and cash!) and invaded.

Frankly, Trelawney was happy to let them. To her the islands had been an excuse, nothing more, and if Cuba wanted them they were welcome to them.

The US felt differently.

Feeling rather strongly about the possibility of their space program funding getting cut off should their sponsor lose her home and income, US heavy bombers firebombed Havana, the capital of Cuba, later that same day. Paratroopers landed the day after that, and the first armored regiments hit the shores later that week.

The conflict was over in plenty of time for her to pay them for the Mars launch, and everyone quietly pretended that the US presenting Cuba to her to rule over as part of her now-expanded domain wasn't a blatant attempt to keep her happy enough for the money to continue flowing.

Politics at its best.

Of course, the Soviets tried to annex Berlin in response, but under the 'favor for favor' category Sybil went and used the twin tools of invisibility and the Imperio spell and the next ICBM test launch by the Soviets as a show of force had an actual bomb on board, went off course, and landed on Moscow.

Oops.

The resulting mushroom cloud nearly ended the Cold War right there. Russia nearly collapsed in the subsequent civil war and lost all of Eastern Europe and most other holdings in the process of sorting things out again. Deprived of secret Soviet backing, the Vietnam War also came to a sudden, successful end; and North Korea collapsed into anarchy as well, ending up reabsorbed by the South. The USSR was lucky not to lose its own provinces in the scuffle, and the world

breathed a sigh of relief as it took a decade for them to get back to where they were threatening and bullying everyone again.

During this decade of relative peace, there were no clear threats to unite the world against, so the UN gradually fizzled out until it vanished entirely. Most people neither noticed nor cared when it went the way of the League of Nations before it.

Dead from a supreme lack of interest in paying its bills.

Backing up a step, on a whim before the bombing happened Trelawney sought out the legal heir to Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna, last surviving child of the last ruler of Imperial Russia, and bought from her the rights to the Czarist palaces there, picking them all up the day before the blast using a staff much like Harry's, liberal use of Confundus charms, Notice-Me-Not spells and muggle repelling wards (provided by the Potters) so the muggles would not notice the loss before their absence became irrelevant.

Actually, she bought her rights to the whole country, but only collected the Moscow palaces for now. She didn't have any use for them, but it seemed such a shame to burn them away to ash when they were so pretty. The hardest part was clearing out all of those nasty soviet administrators who had squatted there, but that was quickly enough solved by using Imperio on the KGB to do the clearing for her, putting them all in holding cells she made sure were directly under the blast.

Decapitating a tyranny always results in a power struggle.

Despite the success of these secret actions, outwardly the only thing she did to acknowledge them was to change her title to Czarina. However, the USA politely refused to acknowledge that, and still called her a queen.

Now as everyone knows, one of the best things that can happen to a country is for the USA to beat them in a war. While the USSR floundered in its own troubles the US moved into Cuba and built factories and roads, schools and bridges, throwing up more

infrastructure than they'd ever had before and funneling enough money into the country to transform it overnight.

Businesses invested there. Entrepreneurs built resorts and clubs and nice houses. Jobs materialized and manufactured goods became cheap and readily available. People who'd once considered themselves rich for owning two shirts discovered just how different the extravagant joys of capitalism were.

And, of course, they had bases for the space launch and recovery program built there. It was actually a better spot than Florida, as it was closer to the equator, but building there was out of the question so long as that country was a hostile and belligerent neighbor.

When that formerly hostile neighbor instead became the property of the same kind and generous person giving you so much cash to fund that very space program, it seems only neighborly to give a little back in return.

And, frankly, Queen Sybil was happy to let them treat her little country as the 51st state. It saved her the trouble of running it herself, to be honest, and she had other concerns to be taking care of.

Although, here it must be said she was not totally irresponsible regarding her responsibility to rule. She simply took the Fairy Queen's advice to heart and followed Harry's example once again - this time in creating fortified magical villages based on his design for Godric's Hollow and its sister cities. These were not independent of the local government, like his were (mostly because she WAS the local government!) but other than that they were pretty similar - and she would eventually throw up a good two dozen of them to house her magicals, governed by the Cup and Hat combination the Queen recommended.

Of course, Sybil made all of her magicals speak English with the help of a few thousand Language Lozenges so they could work better with those nice Americans, chose from among their muggleborns the best, most honest and reliable according to her unicorn senses, put them under loyalty oath to her, and sent them off to receive training to help

her run her muggle government (which those oaths expiring when they formally left her service).

With the aid of copious amounts of veritaserum, corruption vanished virtually overnight. Because of that, organized crime never did get much of a toehold there, and as a direct result of that it became a more and more attractive place to live and do business and the standard of living kept rising.

Cuba had never been what could be called one of the Great Magical Nations, as their primary discipline was voodoo, and that was mostly self-taught. The practitioners did not show much of a tendency toward cooperation, either.

Nobody magical with any education would even come near the place because of the naturally occurring lethifold menace native there. Those creatures also seemed to prefer to prey on magical beings over any other kind of food. So nobody magical with the least clue would even approach the islands. For that reason her Cuban magical population was quite small, less than a tenth the size it should be, as the natives knew of no defense and were frequently preyed upon by lethifolds - or left the country altogether.

Not even Sybil Trelawney would sleep there. They preferred sleeping prey, and though she might be a dryad the idea of being consumed wasn't any fun. Thus it was doubly important to get those special magical villages built, as the same defenses he'd devised to hold off dementors worked on lethifolds.

Still, it was something of a conundrum. Nobody magical with any knowledge or skill would go there because of the lethifolds. But she couldn't protect her magical people from the lethifolds until somebody with knowledge and skill came there to construct the wards.

In the end she'd have to hire an American magical security force to basically conduct an invasion, keeping armed camps and guards on watch at all times while their experts set up the basic wards, then pay extra to keep it secret, because she didn't have anybody native who could do it.

Sybil would fix that, but it would be a slow process and involve very carefully hiring teachers from other countries (mostly muggleborn Ravenclaws moving out of Britain as they ran into a wall of pureblood prejudice after graduation, as it turned out). Given a generation or two, that, along with safe places for her people to reside, could transform the magical community of her country into something halfway decent, even built up from essentially nothing.

But it wouldn't be fast enough for their queen.

Sybil Trelawney, like many students, had neglected her studies in favor of things she'd felt more interesting at the time. And, not unlike most of those who do that, ended up regretting it in the long term.

But it was one thing to not qualify for jobs you might like, and quite another to have your meager, underdeveloped skills being the primary thing holding off a grisly death in a war against evil.

She didn't think her underdeveloped, undereducated magicals could hold off a single squad of British hit wizards, should Dumbledore send them after her. Also, as the many multilayered betrayals had proved, hired help could not be trusted. So it was up to her to defend herself, if she could; and simply put, Sybil was not competent to go off into battle like she was. She knew it. She'd arrived back into the past knowing it. So one of the first things she'd resolved on her arrival was that was one of the things she was going to fix.

After setting the Evans family into motion, and recruiting the Potters the same way (there had been enough proof of Dumbledore's manipulations even now to fully back up her story if you knew where to look - and she did, so not only could she successfully point that out to the skeptical couple to get their support against him, but could also point out what the current rumblings of the Pureblood class was going to lead to shortly), Sybil decided that the best way to learn Potions was to get taught - and pay attention this time.

So, even before getting a country, the dryad simply shrank her apparent age to eleven and went and enrolled herself in the best Potions program she knew of - Beauxbatons.

She did this because, frankly, she knew she was weak on everything, not just potions, having been a giggling gossip during school instead of the serious student she now wished she'd been. So the logical step to take was to get her education all over again. Hiring magical tutors for all subjects would send rumors into the magical community she did not want Dumbledore alerted of, and going to Hogwarts was out of the question as it was his seat of power.

A trickle of emigrating muggleborns getting teaching jobs at a previously uninteresting country was one thing, and not even a terribly interesting one provided you did not know of the cities she planned to build there, or the fact that the muggle queen of that island was, in fact, a witch.

A sudden celebrity appearing to hire all the best magical educators as her own person tutors, however? He'd find out about that and investigate.

So despite Beauxbatons being weaker on Defense than she would like, it was them or Durmstrang, and she didn't think her unicorn nature could tolerate being taught the Dark Arts.

Besides, she'd been to Beauxbatons before. Growing up in Greece it had been a choice: them or Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons had the better Divination program - a class she had sadly slept through half of, having stayed up all too many late nights at parties.

Starting out in '63, she could graduate once again by '70, a full year ahead of Voldemort's rise. Only this time she'd do it right! And, coincidentally, she'd be out of school a year before her younger self started to attend there.

One more student going to a magical school did not set off the same kind of waves as a person with a mysterious background appearing with all the gold she needed to hire all the best tutors on every subject. And they had no reason to associate this humble student with the Czarina of Cuba.

So, taking advantage of the loan of Luna's Time Turner to double days as often as her duties required, switching between schooling and government duties, along with the occasional day out here or there to go give speeches, shake hands, and play prancing pony before the American muggle space program, that was what she'd done. Sybil had gone back to school, studying hard enough this time to score top marks in most of her subjects, not even caring about her lack of social life this time around.

Probably a good thing, as this time she could have had one if she'd wanted one, and that might've distracted her from what she was there for. Besides, she'd had a party life the last time around, and it had not prepared her for real life in the slightest.

So, with that in mind, she tripled her days. One for governing her realm and making public appearances, one for full-time schooling, and the other for additional study, ladening herself with additional tutoring, side research and projects (and, increasingly as time went on, preparing for war).

Things went on this way quite happily along this pattern until shortly after the Venus launch, when Sybil went to go ask something of the Potters, and found them conversing with Professor McGonagall, asking the woman who was probably Dumbledore's most devoted follower to confirm these charges against him.

This would not send rumors through the magical community that he would overhear, this was sending him a telegram saying, "Hi! I am your enemy!"

The Deputy Headmistress was already enraged by the allegations and Sybil could see in that heartbeat the destruction of all of her plans. She would go tell Albus, and he would make all those ugly rumors go away, after tracing them all to their source - which would include killing her.

Then he might hear Sybil'd survived his execution of her, and would look into why, blowing the whole secret scenario wide open, much too early for her to do anything about defending it properly.

The most critical people hadn't even been born yet!

"NOOOOOOOO!!!!" Sybil screamed in desperation as she lunged for the Deputy Headmistress, grabbing her in a hug, her primal fear not letting her think beyond holding the older woman back so she'd not destroy their secret.

Contact between the desperate dryad and the outraged Transfiguration Professor created a link between them as their magic struggled to subdue or resist the other, and as their magic mingled like that a link reformed between McGonagall and her tree.

The confusion of accidental magic re-transformed McGonagall into a dryad, reestablishing her link to her tree. This younger McGonagall had never had such a link, but the tree was there, and it was hers, and when touching the other dryad both trees became aware of her, and so McGonagall reconnected with her stately birch, downloading all of her memories from it up until the moment of Trelawney's departure into the past.

In that instant she turned from an enemy about to destroy them into Sybil's strongest ally, aware of all of the duplicitous and murderous behavior of the Headmaster she had so vehemently defended the moment before.

And, once more, she recalled the Headmaster's perfidity in detail - including a large number of murders that hadn't happened yet.

McGonagall did take a moment to stop and explain to the Potters about the loyalty oath she'd been asked to take to join the Order of The Phoenix, and how that had influenced her behavior. She also gave them a long and eye-opening lecture detailing all of the various ways that oath had been abused. That had been eye-opening in the extreme to the older couple, as they could independently verify that, as Dumbledore had once tried to get them to swear to the same thing and follow him against Grindelwald. Hearing exactly what abuses he'd put that to had been chilling, and made them glad of their refusal back then (they'd not seen a loyalty oath as needed - but could see

how the old bastard could use a crisis closer to home as greater motivation).

One of the orders McGonagall had been under was to "Pay no attention to Snape's excesses", and the harm THAT had done was worth a small book on its own! It was also subtle enough to convince the Potters of the real danger, exactly because it didn't sound so bad, yet had led to such harm and abuses.

They were now finally convinced enough the Headmaster was an enemy to act against him in subtle ways, beyond just helping to prepare for the war caused by Voldemort's rise to power.

But while the war coming up was a very real danger, McGonagall had been the one telling families about the deaths of their children at school, and could verify more people had died in Dumbledore's muggleborn testing than in all the fights and battles of Voldemort's reign of terror. For one thing, the muggleborn testing had been going on over a much longer time. He'd been actively killing muggleborns for over a hundred and fifty years. They had only the possibility of undoing twenty eight years of that (because two of the thirty years Trelawney had gone back in time had already passed them by).

Still, saving those people was going to be a real problem.

Coincidentally, there were in Harry's notes deaths recorded that McGonagall remembered as blamed on Death Eaters that according to Riddle's memories neither he nor his followers were responsible for.

So yet another thing to watch out for was Dumbledore culling his political or business rivals and blaming it on the opposition during the war.

"The WORST problem, of course, is that I can no longer go on as I have done," Minerva sorrowed before them all. "There is no way I can ignore what he is doing there. Nor am I good enough of an actress to pretend to support him as fervently as I have done! I shall have to resign my position!"

Harry's grandparents began to soothe the woman, offering her comfort and a place to stay, while Sybil was thinking furiously. Then she went quietly off to fetch her knapsack full of supplies sent back by Harry.

Among the things Harry sent her was the spells for creating a simulacrum. There were very few wizards who knew all of the magic involved, but Riddle was one of them, and so Harry was also because of the stolen memories. It was considered a Dark Art, so Riddle had determined to learn it.

Voldemort had never made much use of them, but Sybil had just had a flash of insight as to what Harry would have done in this circumstance. She went to Mars to take a few cuttings off of McGonagall's lovely birch there, then came back to Earth to plant those around a few places. She did this because for her idea to work McGonagall would need to access her tree, and right then her only current one was on Mars. So if she went there she would have a difficult time coming back until she had a tree planted on Earth again.

But Sybil went to all of this effort because she'd just had insight as to how Harry would have solved their little problem.

The reason more people did not use simulacrums was because they were at best limited copies of a person. Thanks to the polyjuice-like ointments they were treated with (that had to be charged with a person's blood to give it that person's shape and form) their appearance was identical to the original. However, they were still just rough snow statues with hearts of stone that were animated with advanced magics.

Even with the original on hand helping a simulacrum had only a fraction of the original's knowledge, possessed minor personality flaws, and in those cases where they had magical power, it was half of the original's at best, but had no capacity to recharge itself. They would wind down like a muggle toy whose batteries had expired. And while it was possible to use a ritual to recharge a simulacrum's simulated magical core, that required time and was not at all subtle, and so required complete privacy.

Pulling out your dolls to recharge them periodically was one of the many flaws of using simulacrum as spies. Also, Imperio and other forms of mind control magics were easier, and gave you a better servant.

In that flash of insight, Trelawney had understood that Harry would have seen those very weaknesses as a strength in this circumstance. McGonagall could not go on with what she'd been doing knowing what the Headmaster was up to. So, since the simulacrum had only a limited portion of the original's knowledge, eliminate those portions of her knowledge that was causing her trouble. The simulacrum could forget the abuses and believe in Dumbledore just like McGonagall had once done. That could also cover a personality flaw, as she now despised him, but her duplicate could still admire and respect him.

The magic could only do so much, and couldn't cover everything. If you tried to create a perfect copy it would slip and uncover something, creating gaps and weaknesses in the copy. However, building in the flaws yourself, they would not appear randomly. And teaching a subject actually required only a fraction of a person's knowledge, since they'd had to take a full course load themselves to pass school, and earn high marks to gain a professorship. So they knew most subjects, yet only taught one.

The reason why McGonagall needed access to her tree was that Trelawney had a brilliant flash of insight, and instead of giving the rough snow statue a heart of stone, they could grant it one of wood - wood taken from Minerva's own tree and formed by her into a proper duplicate heart.

With that link to herself always inside of it, she could recharge it without the need of a ritual, while the simulacrum pretended to sleep at night. Then, in a flash of brilliance, she decided that it could even return information on its day to her via those same spells and enchantments the Headmaster had worked out for the mental communication of his replacement Sorting Hat!

On the heels of that stroke of brilliance, Sybil decided that her own past self would not be going to Hogwarts. She'd send a simulacrum of her own in her place! One programmed to repeat the predictions

she'd made, and only them. (Substituting herself for her double on the morning Harry came to collect her, of course.) And that not only saved her from a horrible phase of her life, but it meant that she didn't have to keep secrets from her younger self any longer. So she went and 'woke her up' right away, establishing a connection to their shared tree and all of the memories that came with it.

For her younger self, it felt like a prediction, one yet to come true, and parts of which she was determined to change as she did not like the outcome a bit (well, except for the Harry parts).

Suddenly her younger self was determined to be a brilliant student, and would not waste her time in classes at all, outshining even her always-successful older sister Cassandra (who'd always left Sybil in her dust before) much to the shock of said older sister, and their mother Pythia, both of whom could hardly believe the change in young Sybil, the scatterbrained under-achiever who'd always been such a disappointment to the family before.

Of course they had to do readings to investigate why. But when those came back as the white oak, symbol of the Oracle at Delphi, it calmed them greatly as they concluded that she had grown into her Gift at last.

On the part of the older Sybil, she shuddered as her personal history rewrote itself on the fly, as it were. Her previous past grew a little dim and dreamlike where it contradicted the new. But, now able to recall a past where she had not misspent her youthful opportunities or education, but was an exemplary student, she was able to expand upon that foundation and build up her skills yet further, taking electives and courses she had neglected her previous time around, while going yet further in depth on subjects she had covered.

With all of these beautiful plans running around her head, the older Sybil went off to collect the rest of the original twenty dryads she was aware of! They could all be replaced by these special simulacrums, except the ghosts (who could be taught to use Astral Projection to appear in spirit form periodically).

And when she was done with that, they may as well help her on her tasks!

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Author's Notes:

I have seen countless stories where it is the magical world that collapses and it is the muggle one that comes to save it, or feast on the remains, take your pick. But I have never before seen one where that is the other way around - when it is the muggle world that is falling, and if anything is to be saved it is the magical world to be doing it.

Anyway, time travel is always a little confusing, the more so when they change things. And it goes without saying that it gets more complicated when they start tying Time in loops.

Still, their capacity to do so is limited, and just about exhausted. So it should be back to the future with them soon.

Chapter Seventy-Three

by Lionheart

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It is still amazing to me how few people are willing to trust me to know what I am doing with my own story.

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If the decision hadn't already been taken out of her hands Trelawney would never have dared to awaken McGonagall. She simply don't dare do much in the magical world for fear of being noticed by Dumbledore back when he was at the height of his power. Before the champions got in a lucky surprise blow that knocked him down, and then commenced kicking him in the crotch, he was unbeatable - and that time was now.

So she had to walk very softly in the magical realms. Dumbledore could ignore a few people not being as smart, because he liked them as dupes anyway. That played into a blind spot. But he was very, very formidable right then and she don't want to tip him off.

Fortunately he would not notice much that occurred in the muggle world, even major events. Having been born in 1800, Dumbledore was closer to two hundred years old than one, and he'd felt he'd learned all there was to know about muggles in his teens. In truth, at the time he had studied them until he knew them better than just about any pureblood magical. But his feelings of magical superiority over the mundane had led him to stop feeling they had anything worthwhile to teach. Then intellectual superiority set in, and he'd refused to learn any more on the subject from those less educated than himself - which was everyone.

After all, he knew himself to be an expert on muggles and was not about to accept correction or additional instruction from anyone less accomplished! And who could equal the Great Albus Dumbledore? It never even occurred to him that after nearing two hundred years of rapid change his knowledge of muggles was getting a little out of date.

He was certain he was an expert, and that there was nothing worth his while to learn in the field. That's all there was to it. His time was not infinite, and despite his many rituals he could not pay attention to everything, so he focused on that which truly mattered - control of the wizarding world.

The muggles could go amuse themselves in the slime.

The average muggle was not aware of the world of magic by design, but the typical wizard ignored their muggle brethren by choice, and the families of muggleborns were often amazed by how events, major events in the muggle world, would pass by without changing the magical one in the slightest.

Not even the destruction of Moscow flustered magicals all that much, as the center of magical Russia had always been St. Petersburg, and had been ever since Peter the Great. There hadn't been a significant magical presence in Moscow ever since they'd fled the terrors of the Dark Lord Rasputin.

On the muggle side of things the politics were surprisingly straightforward for this sort of thing. Back during the '60's the two superpowers didn't like each other a bit, and competed in everything - including the space race. Sybil had approached the United States because they had a better success rate with their interplanetary probes (during that decade alone, the USSR launched eight Mars probes, NONE of which reached the target active, four of them failing on launch and two breaking up shortly after. Contrasted with the USA, which launched four probes to Mars, three of which had successful missions). Her purposes were best served by the higher success ratio, as no one truly knew how successful the magical safeguards would be. But the communists didn't like her pouring literal tons of money into their rival's program and acted to spike it by taking her country from her and cutting her off at the knees.

During that stage of the Cold War it was fashionable for the superpowers to act through proxies, due to the deniability reducing the nuclear threat for all involved, and the best client state the Soviets had in that area was Cuba, which was nicely situated to act against

Sybil's small island country where she presumably kept her treasury with all of that gold.

They gave the order to their vassal state, which acted, the USA felt strongly enough to act directly in turn. USSR tried reprisals, even test firing an ICBM (which, under those circumstances amounted to a statement of 'don't push us or you won't like the results' ie, 'we're going to have our way on this or you will suffer', basically threatening a nuclear war if they did not get their way) which didn't have the results they'd intended because Sybil had them use it to decapitate their own government.

This was about as uncomplicated as world politics gets.

Luckily the Soviet readiness was less than it should have been. Also the KGB obeyed Sybil's command to eliminate anyone with the nuclear launch codes, or else the destruction could have gone further than it did. But the country had declared war on her through their proxy, so she felt no guilt over it. And just like when Dumbledore or Voldemort sent agents out to kill someone, the one truly holding responsibility was the one who'd given the order to attack.

She'd really never have even considered acting against them if they hadn't started it first. Her priorities lay elsewhere, their games didn't matter to her in the slightest, except where they impacted the space race. But, should you start a war, no one has any right to feel sorry for you should you lose it. That would be like shedding tears for Voldemort. Still, for all the catastrophe this was to some, it passed the wizarding world by almost unnoticed.

No, it frequently dismayed the families of first generation magicals to learn just how LITTLE the muggle world mattered to the magical one.

And in this, as in most other aspects of magical culture, Dumbledore led the pack. The man was not perfect. He did have blind spots, and his arrogance was one of them. While he'd kept his attention focused on other things, seeing only the basic overview of the muggles, their underpinnings, culture and major events had become all but incomprehensible to him.

Sybil had every intention of using that to her advantage, and had only ever intended to go to Magical Britain on rescue trips or necessary setup, for the very reason that she did not feel safe tiptoeing around in his backyard.

Then the event with McGonagall had happened.

Of interest to note, Minerva's body was still her human one, and likely would remain so until she died or was remade by the cordial in the future. And they did not think death was a good option, because when they got around to awakening those dryads who had been ghosts they remained ghosts and did not gain the human magical cores that would have come from living bodies.

So even though the software was connected to their trees, so to speak, the hardware was going to have to wait for the cordial upgrades before the links were complete in all of their functions. And under those circumstances nobody wanted to risk dying.

It could be awkward not to have a body when you needed one.

However, having awakened McGonagall to her future memories it was the only thing Sybil could stand to do to go off awakening the other dryads.

Because she couldn't do this alone.

It was too much. Not even with all of the information and resources Harry'd sent back, would she be able to rescue everyone those two Dark Lords killed between them. Heck, some of their victims would just not want to go. Others would insist on taking oaths that meant their destruction. And those reasons were entirely separate from the difficulty of saving them in the first place!

No, she had to have help, and as the Potters going to Dumbledore's most devoted follower to answer allegations about him proved, the only people she could truly trust in this war were her sister dryads. Others would just take too long waking up from the illusions Dumbledore's reputation cast across their world! And, what was

worse, if even one of those that they rescued went back to tell Dumbledore, or resume their former life, it was all over.

If nobody learned about the secret rescue efforts, and the dryads all worked together and did what they could to make best use of their information, they could save thousands of people who would otherwise have died (or worse)! However, all it took was one person thinking they could let the 'Leader of the Light' know about this great work, or not taking their warnings seriously about not going back to their former lives, and it would all be over.

And EVERYBODY has compelling things they'd want to go back for!

So it was back to the fairy way - kidnap them and leave enchanted pieces of wood in their places. Steal them right before their deaths and leave animated dummies behind. And, if they proved unable to keep the secret on their own, then either she could construct villages they would be unable to leave, or perhaps they would just prefer to take Draught of the Living Death until the timeline had caught up to Harry's present.

It would be a sad waste of potential, but some people could only handle it that way. But while it would be a sacrifice, she could ultimately leave the choice up to them of which they preferred, house arrest or sleeping through the gap. Because if they were left to do whatever they wanted someone would tell, and because of that thousands would die who might otherwise have lived if only they'd kept the secret.

That was worth a little discomfort, don't you think?

In this particular case, she'd count oaths to one side or the other as death. Because their life as a free individual was over. Although in the case of oaths sworn, she might do well to steal the person, leave the double in their place, then Confound the original to make them think they'd sworn the oath, and switch them back for the copy.

Less disruption to the timeline that way, and the only simulacrams they could recharge were the ones of a dryad that had a wooden heart from her tree. She couldn't do that for anyone else, as the

magic was incompatible. So best only to steal people for good when it was right before their demise, and the lack of power of the duplicate would not be noticed.

Either way it was going to be massively tricky and there was no way that she was going to be able to deal with everything alone. For things to work, she had to have helpers that she could trust carrying a part of the load! It was just too big a job to do by herself.

At least she now had a place to move such a large magical population to. It might not be much now, but between all of the deaths she was going to be faking in Britain, there was going to be quite a large population of expatriate British magicals in Cuba soon.

Meanwhile, they could be addressing one other concern.

The magical world had a bare handful of 'heavy hitters', people so powerful they basically eclipsed everyone else around them. Dumbledore was one, Tom Riddle another, Moody probably (though not quite on the same level) and for Britain that was mostly it. If there were any others, they were secretive about their powers.

Bellatrix had been reaching for that status, but there were scores of people in her category, the 'almost there' types. Most never made it - very possibly because Dumbledore culled any that came close enough to reaching that level before they became potential threats.

You don't become King of The Hill without shoving others down off of it.

However now they had a unique opportunity to get their handful of dryads a little closer to the top. All of them had had magical educations at some point in their lives before, virtually all of them at Hogwarts. But different magical schools each had a different emphasis, and one could learn things at one that were not taught at another, and vice versa. Also, the strengths of one school were often enough the weaknesses of another.

It was Sybil's idea to get the rest of the original twenty dryads awakened, then have them all shrink their apparent ages and attend

Beauxbatons with her. It being '65 when they started, they could graduate again by '72, and that dual school approach held one more advantage.

Dumbledore was a genius, and tied into every source of information he could, but not even he knew everything. So rather than knowing the specifics of every single case, he had to go with some generalities.

Hogwarts students typically knew a certain set of skills. They might know them well or poorly, but they'd all been taught in the same general manner, and so could be expected to react to some situations out of a limited set of tools. The same with other students. Those of Beauxbatons generally knew their own set, which was different from any other, but if you knew generally what they were taught you had a general idea about how they'd react to all sorts of situations. The same held true of Durmstrang or any other school.

Then, just like bird watchers, you learn to tell which of those categories the people you observe fall into by looking for certain markings. Then, once you had them pegged, could extrapolate all sorts of useful information about range and habits and so forth.

People who are very into sports can tell you "Oh, that team favors a running game" or "they favor a passing game", or short passes or long passes or anything like that. Once you know that information, you know how to respond to their probable actions.

But that 'recognize, categorize and extrapolate', system gets complicated when you no longer know what tool set they are using. And if you throw in two complete sets of education when you'd never observed people with that combo before, all of a sudden your easy predictions aren't so easy anymore.

Back to the sports analogy. The right sorts of responses to some plays are the exact wrong way to respond to other tactics. If you expect someone to play the running game, and guard them close up tight, that means you leave their receivers wide open, and if they pass instead you are out of position.

Every time he guessed their actions, and that guess was WRONG, they were better off. So everything they could do to prevent him from predicting them was effort well spent, and doubly so because right now he knew them as well as he knew anyone. He had them pegged. Dumbledore knew his staff in such detail he could extrapolate their actions like he could a favorite toy.

So it was past time they set some variables he wasn't aware of to work in there, before he realized it was them he was opposing!

And those first few times he thinks he has you pegged, and he doesn't, would be BIG mistakes! So if you can take advantage of those to get even a couple of goals ahead... well, all the better for you and your side.

The only dryad out of the original twenty that Trelawney did not DARE awaken to her powers was Bellatrix, because she confused Harry with Voldemort, and right now Voldemort was about to go on killing sprees that would be bad enough without her assisting him with her future knowledge.

The ghosts could perform a lot of spying for their side, and while they might not have magical cores they could in theory learn to possess simulacrum and that way attend muggle schools.

Everything they knew that Dumbledore didn't (or even that he didn't know they knew) could, in theory, be an advantage. That was how he'd grown to rule that magical world, after all, by knowing so much more than anyone else around him - and controlling what they knew so he'd know what they'd do.

Sybil didn't even think about her appearance, wearing Hermione's face and form everywhere she went because she vastly preferred it to her own. Her own face had not much happiness associated with it. Plain at best and ugly most of the rest of the time, it had kept her out of most of life's joys, and she'd hated her own appearance. It had only been since she'd started to look like Hermione that her life had taken off to become interesting and fun. So that was the one she wore most of the time since gaining it.

Frankly, it was the face she was hoping to get married and buried in. And since she already had someone in mind for her hand, she didn't go looking among the boys at Beauxbatons or Cuba.

But in order to keep Harry safe for future snuggles, she ought to protect his family also. Simplicity itself to accomplish for the Evans.

Easier said than done for the Potters.

As they were a modestly wealthy, well-respected family with businesses and a vote on the Wizengamot he coveted, the Potters fell directly under the eye of Dumb-Old-Dork. He'd marked the family as having things he intended to consume, and right here at the seat of his power was not a great place to keep secrets from him - Particularly not right at the focus of his attention.

No, that was simply more than she could do, more especially so since kids talk, and one of Dumbledore's greatest information gathering devices was to listen in on all of the chatter between students at Hogwarts.

Kids talk. They tell their friends things, and at that school Albus had near-infinite capacity for eavesdropping on those conversations. This, more than anything, was the source of his all-knowing, almost prescient persona. What he did not overhear, he could mostly extrapolate from what he did.

And Trelawney was already feeling at or near her limits for changing her own past. Getting James Potter to NOT go to Hogwarts was one of those things that felt like it would have been too great a jump by itself. But her powers for that were already stretched near their limits, just by getting her past self to study hard.

So, to protect the Potters would require a very delicate touch.

One of the muggle movie picture stories that Professor Myrtle had shown to the school before Sybil traveled back had an archeologist trying to bypass a trap on a gold idol by switching it out for a bag of sand weighing almost the same. Only he'd misjudged the weight and set off the defense measures.

Still, it was a VERY nifty idea (the muggles had plenty of those, she'd learned over her short period of association) and could apply to her situation.

For example, she was already using it to alter her own past. Simply not going to Hogwarts lay outside of her power. That was too big a jump. But sending a simulacrum of herself in her place made it alright. The way it felt was that it bridged a part of the gap so she didn't have to jump as far, and what gap remained lay inside of her abilities.

Similarly, she didn't think stepping in to publicly stop raids would work. Even if she had the combat power to overcome the Death Eaters making the raids, her fairy nature couldn't handle the load of so much changing the past that would result. But by STEALING the victims, it felt as though the timeline had been fooled into going on much the same. She accomplished her change, but the effect on the timestream was not so bad that she couldn't cover it.

Just exactly like how they intended to save the victims of Dumbledore's loyalty oaths: minimum disruption, simply switch them out for a fake just long enough for it to take the oath instead of them. And McGonagall and the other dryads that were staff members of Hogwarts were ideally positioned to rescue those victims of muggleborn testing just exactly the same way - give them a detention out of the castle where they could be safely replaced without Dumbledore's awareness, then switch them for a double. That way events could proceed with minimal disruption.

It was the strategy for her whole little jaunt into the past, or most of it.

So, applying that to this situation, she ought to get the Potters to leave their business and political affairs in the hands of some simulacrums of themselves, which could be programmed to handle them as well as they could, then relocate the family itself to safer pastures.

She just viewed it as an early rescue.

Since Europe lay too close to Dumbledore's seat of power, and was his area of secondary interest directly after control of Great Britain, and Australia lay too far out of the way to coordinate with her, the USA it was.

James and Lily would still be going to Hogwarts, along with the rest of their friends, but armed with a couple of secrecy oaths, things ought to be alright.

Actually, while some disruptions were planned, many were not. Sybil was taking in the sights and smells of Scotland on her way back to safety from a trip where she'd awakened the ghosts of Myrtle and the Grey Lady, passing through a mixed magic/muggle community on her way to a public floo (much less closely monitored than apparating in Britain) when she saw a large grey wolf about to attack a group of small children.

You'd have to be a monster to see that sort of thing and not intervene. A simple Levicorpus applied on the animal had it floating helpless in the air and the children, most of whom would have died, all ran away to safety.

That was when the strain hit.

Trelawney buckled, feeling like she'd made a jump and NOT been able to hit the other side, but was falling endlessly into blackness. Though she did not know the story, she could already tell she had altered history in a fundamental way - and one that affected her own past too greatly for her powers to absorb.

And it felt like that was killing her, like she was bleeding out. Her powers were trying to fix this, but it lay beyond their capacity.

Luckily she was not alone. McGonagall had made the trip with her, and knew what must have happened, and what had to be done to fix this. Most of those children would have died in this attack. That was actually not so much the issue as they could be kidnapped along with their families and transplanted elsewhere (then Confounded to make them think that was their own idea). No, the true difficulty lay in the

fact that she'd just inadvertently stopped Remus Lupin from becoming a werewolf.

And that was too big a change to their own histories for Sybil to handle.

The special circumstances created by that child's affliction gave him the friends that would later become so central to his life, and he would in turn affect them and their lives. His being a werewolf was central to their having become animagi, which bit of rule-breaking had been a key to their being so very successful pranksters that they didn't mind going 'against the flow' and joining up on what appeared to be the losing side of a war.

Change Harry's parents too much and they didn't get their Harry, which undid all of their own changes into dryads and this little trip into the past.

It was too big a leap to take, and trying to compensate was killing Sybil. The tax on her fairy powers was so great it threatened to dissolve her essence in a way that would take her and her trees with her.

McGonagall spent a whole moment agonizing over this. Fenrir Greyback liked killing children. But, having glutted himself on so many, he'd have neglected to kill Remus, leaving him only injured and infected. Simply undoing Sybil's act of stopping the attack was unpalatable in the extreme.

Resolving upon a course of action, Minerva transfigured a muzzle and leash for the feral werewolf, hooking him up to a convenient lamppost so as not to endanger anyone (where he would be found by Animal Control not much later, and wake up in a cage - out of which he could unfortunately escape with ease, having had to apparate out of those before).

That was not her plan. No, that was simply a measure to keep herself and Sybil safe while she implemented her real design - using Point Me charms to track down a young and terrified Remus Lupin taking comfort in the arms of his equally frightened parents, who knew what

cruel fate he'd only just barely escaped, and offering to teach him to become an animagus.

A wolf animagus to be precise. He could PRETEND to be a werewolf! And with the right secrecy oath, and perhaps a mild Confundus or two to help in the act, ought to be able to pull it off.

No one pretended lycanthrope in much the same way as they didn't pretend cancer - the treatments were miserable and could severely impact your life.

It required a fair amount of convincing, and a bit of subtle magic, but in the end Sybil relaxed from her overstrained condition into mere exhaustion. The cost was still great, but it was no longer killing her colleague and friend.

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Author's Notes:

I am amazed that I had to take a chapter out to explain how Fidel pulled a Saddam and got spanked for it. You'd think... ah, well. Maybe it is a bit more clear now. I'd hate to stop the action (such as it is) for yet MORE explanations! I really do want to get somewhere with this fic.

Chapter Seventy-Four by Lionheart

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The work entitled 'The Rise And Reign of Beauxbatons', bound in a three volume set, was far more interesting reading than 'Hogwarts: A History'. But it really had its roots in Ancient Rome, and much of Roman culture was borrowed from the Greeks.

In the time of Ancient Greece magical and mundane worlds were not separated at all, or not any more than the rich and poor were always separated. Nonmagical humans were taught to regard magical ones as gods, and worshipped them. It was that way all over the world.

Purebloods have been trying to get back to that state of affairs ever since.

Positions of specific deity, like Apollo and Diana, while originally specific individuals became inheritable as those first people grew old and died and other magicals took over for them so the mundanes worshipping them had a proper sense of continuity. They even had their own contests to determine who got what job, much like modern magicals competed over who got what position of authority in their current Ministries - which did a great deal to explain the convoluted and often contradictory tales of identity and parentage, which god did what and who married whom.

The job of Zeus, being the leader, was naturally a prime pick. The only one more sought after was Pan, the party god, until that led to some of the winners of the Zeus position doing things more suited to Pan, eventually leading to the reputation Zeus had of a womanizer.

And that tied in nicely to the phenomena of magicals born to mundane parents. Folks always just assumed those were the result of some Olympian having an affair with the parent - whether that parent knew it or not (the idea of shapechanging was always such a great excuse).

One of the more telling remnants of that time was how magicals still swore by the names of the more powerful of their kind.

Still, back then when they said things like 'Apollo showed up to bless the priest' they MEANT that Apollo, or at least the wizard who had that job currently, showed up, made an appearance, and did something to the priest, probably a beneficial spell. Although records of those false gods giving out powerful magical items to heroes were also true.

Anyway, when nascent Rome took over Greece that relationship between magical and mundane worlds remained largely unchanged. Rome's great advance lay in the fact that they absorbed the 'gods' of the conquered people into their own magical society rather than destroying them, as had previously been the norm. The names of the jobs changed, but not much else. Naturally this caused some squabbles as new pecking orders had to be established, but all in all it left the burgeoning empire with twice the magical firepower it would have if they'd gone the normal way and exterminated the defeated magical people, as the Olympians had so eagerly done to the Titans.

Suddenly the Roman pantheon of witches and wizards masquerading as gods was the most powerful in the business, and they happily went about proving that to all of their neighbors, conquering them and absorbing their magicals in much the same way until it was literally as much as they could do to govern what they already controlled.

The current modern glut of magical means of travel did not exist back then. It was horses, for the most part, just the same as mundanes used - although enchanted chariots did tend to go faster than the mundane versions. And owl post was not invented until the end, when one of the Athenas began to wonder 'Why have I got this owl for a symbol anyway?' and tried to work out some use for the lazy bird, finally getting it to carry packages and eventually notes for her, a development that surely would have saved the Empire had it been even twenty years earlier.

If the pantheon of Rome's false gods had had apparation, floo systems, modern brooms and owl post, in all likelihood the Empire would never have fallen. As it was, to communicate they actually had

to go around and talk to people, and that meant travel over hundreds or even thousands of miles using methods not much better than their mundane cousins.

As it was, they'd relied on Hermes, aka Mercury the Messenger God, to carry notes back and forth, and it was discovered way back in Greece that job wasn't any fun, running around being other peoples' errand boy; so to convince wizards to take it they'd been forced to give it other responsibilities, and that meant he was NOT devoting his full time or attention to getting the mail delivered. Indeed, he often resented doing it and so put it off whenever possible while he fiddled with other things, and that created delays.

The Pony Express would have done a much better job.

Centralizing authority over such a vast empire delayed response time significantly to both internal and external threats. After all, mundanes only paid homage to magicals because they provided valuable services in the form of false miracles, using magic to help out on critical mundane problems from time to time. And the mundanes don't go on doing that if none of their requests for assistance get answered.

So the central communities of magical beings in Rome and on Olympus decided early on to seed colonies of subservient magical clans in order to keep up services around the vast Roman holdings.

It was the only way to hold up the status quo.

But it was still all one empire and 'One Empire, One Pantheon' was the rule. That meant, of course, that they still had to hold up the image and myth of their false gods being able to answer prayers anywhere in their territory, which need translated into several groups all masquerading as the same gods, so there were several wizards serving as Jupiter, several more serving as Mars, etc, all of them with their own territories to cover.

And all of that leads us to the founding of Paris as a Roman settlement. Having conquered it from the Celts at or around 52 BC they needed proper Roman gods installed just as they established the mundane side of government.

When Roman magical colonists arrived a school was established to educate their children in the ways of magic, and the magical education system of France had been running more or less uninterrupted from that point, making them arguably twice as old as Hogwarts - a claim it would have been easier to maintain had they not had some serious upheavals, changing names, locations, and styles of government more than once during that time.

Of minor historical note: the original forges of Hephaestus, the wizard 'god' of smiths, were destroyed in the original war when Rome first subdued Greece, and were never replaced. So even though his position got passed on, the work he did largely ceased. This explained why just about every Greek hero of note could claim some mighty weapon or suit of armor forged by the gods for him to use, but the Roman heroes didn't.

That was also the point at which Zeus stopped tossing around lightning bolts - the wizard who knew how to make them had died, along with all of his apprentices, when those forges were destroyed as part of the Roman invasion. A stroke which Roman generals of the time felt was a necessary part of the subdual of the region, as it truly broke the Greek defenses, but Roman heroes and scholars and mages had ever since mourned the lack of, for the Empire was certainly poorer without those facilities and the knowledge lost with them.

Without the loss of that center of creativity and invention, and the magical item creation and enchantment that went with it, it is quite possible things might have turned out another way.

Anyway, the Empire fell (mostly due to internal corruption and infighting) and for a while most everyone, magic or mundane, was more concerned with staying alive than with observing the old societal forms.

The Fall of Rome was the End Of The World for most concerned, and it would be a very long time indeed before any kind of nation worth the name rose from the ashes of that mighty empire. What this meant on a personal scale was that supply, order, and authority ceased and

the protection they offered died with them. That meant no legions to protect you from the barbarian hordes. That meant no one could stay in the cities since they weren't getting any more food, fuel or water shipped in; and that meant no laws or judges, which made criminals and thugs the biggest bullies on the block, and thus for a long time Might Made Right as many of the worst thugs went on to become tribal chieftains, then kings.

It was a very unsettling period to live through as basically all the rules of society you take for granted just stopped working one day. People went to sleep all fat and happy with their bread and circuses and suddenly woke up to find themselves cast as extras in Conan the Barbarian. But other sources had more eloquently and penetratingly portrayed the terrible magnitude of the empire's descent into anarchy.

This descent was true of the magicals as well. People fled the cities for the same reasons as the mundanes did, and that took virtually all of the established societal rules and threw them out the window. Then each of the Malfoys and Dumbledores and Riddles of the period went nuts contesting for control of what was left. Everyone who wanted power suddenly saw it undefended and within his grasp - all he had to do was take it.

The results of that were nearly genocidal. The flower of Roman wizardry perished in blood. All this left were the dregs, the misfits and the outcasts, who quietly went on living through the Dark Ages of Wizardry until finally they pulled themselves back into some sort of order a few hundred years after the worst of it was over.

Of course all of that was plenty of time for magical and mundane neighbors to get used to each other, and the whole mystique of holding the one as gods went away when they saw the low-power magicals up close and personal over a few generations, and learned they had to eat and sleep, got cold, dirty and miserable, fell sick and died just like anybody.

Close connection with barely trained magicals had taken away their aura of mystery from the mundanes they'd once ruled over, perhaps forever. And certain segments of magical society had ever since mourned its loss.

During this period not a few of the more competent magicals tried to recreate the status quo they'd once had, making appearances imitating Catholic Saints and trying to restart the whole 'I do tricks, you worship me' arrangement they'd once enjoyed. But those efforts more or less fell flat, until by and large they'd stopped attempting them.

It wasn't that they couldn't convince gullible mundanes of their powers, that was easy. No, it was something deeper. Traditional wizards had never felt comfortable with Christianity at all, and the root of that was that Jesus Christ was not a wizard nor a magical creature, nothing that they could identify really; and that made them nervous when he and his followers went around doing wonders, because a teeny, tiny corner of their minds wondered if he wasn't exactly what he said he was - the son of a living God.

But they largely rejected that idea out of hand, and did their best to avoid thinking about it. They themselves had been playing frauds for so long it was just simpler to assume, in spite of the evidence, that he was just a better faker than they were, and put aside all of the questions about why was it mundanes who followed him could gain miraculous power.

The power of faithful priests was still something wizards could not explain; and they had a continual reminder before their faces in that vampires and other evil things reacted to holy symbols despite the complete lack of magic to them, creating effects which could not be exactly duplicated by any known magic.

There were other things to be said there, but they had nothing to do with the history of Beauxbatons.

As kingdoms and courts stabilized through parts of Europe, witches and wizards found their places in them, as anyone powerful was apt to do - whether that power be based in how many castles or farms you controlled, or the political influence or spies you maintained. If you held power, the courts of those kings welcomed you to use it in their service.

Thus transited the magical beings from objects of false worship to court magicians.

This was a time of great reconstruction for everyone, when old Roman roads were being reestablished, commerce reawakening, and things began to settle down, rising out of the near-tribal era things had fallen into for a time. And the witches and wizards began to look back to rediscover some of their lost arts - many of them because kings they served had heard tales of past accomplishments and called upon their wizards to duplicate them. Soon or late they began to barter this knowledge among themselves, and when that happened they once again began to create a magical society.

It would be a long time before either magic or mundanes would again rise to where they could equal any of the wonders of the fallen empire, but the long road to recovery had begun where rediscovery and progress had reappeared at last.

This was the period when, slowly and with great difficulty, the ruined edifices of the magical colony of Paris got restored. Students and teachers migrated out of the woodland homes they had fled to to once more rejoin the cities, transforming things from the apprenticeship program it had fallen back into to the center of academic learning it had once been. Stray teachers who had camped out in portions of the center, raising descendants who'd been taught, raised, lived and died there, teaching only their own descendants, put away the feuds that had cropped up between their clans during the centuries and once more began to educate a wider magical populace than just their own offspring.

Of course this was largely accomplished by some few of those teachers who'd gone to court getting royal backing, and entering into those halls backed by soldiers who united them under the blades of swords, killing quite a few clans while doing it, but politics was ever thus; and government, true government, was always backed by one thing - force.

It was all very well and good to speak of peace and unity, but more often than you'd think that was brought about by someone getting killed.

Speaking of that, back during the days of court wizards, magic was just as much a part of battles as swords. Every kingdom used their magicals as just another weapon in their wars. The trouble with that was anybody could draft a few hundred peasants and arm them, then see them all slaughtered and do it all over again. But you couldn't do that with wizards. Well, those who did swiftly had no wizards. It takes years of training for them to be any good, and kings are rarely patient fellows. A few days training was good enough for mundane soldiers, so they allocated no more to their magicals.

These kings were almost universally uneducated men, and couldn't imagine the difference it made, nor could they be convinced of the need for it. Attempts to explain were seen as excuses to disguise laziness. After all, what other reason could there be to demand years off when other men their age were giving valuable service?

Wizards must be cowards and slackers, that's all. And the answer to that was to shove them to the front lines and let the feel of real battle make honest men out of them!

"I've never done that before," or "I don't know how" were not acceptable excuses, apt only to enrage muscle headed men who've never had to master a skill more cerebral than picking up a sword or getting on top of a horse, and whose only knowledge of books is that they burn well in a campfire.

"What are you standing there thinking about? Just get out there and DO IT!" was the cry.

It was a barbaric world with barbaric ways of thinking. And back then they drafted soldiers young. Fourteen was a fairly typical starting age for the front line cannon fodder to be eaten up by more experienced men. Wizards with that little training and experience (and they'd only just begun to pluck themselves back up after centuries of being next to nothing at all) were easily overcome by muggle soldiers, especially attacking en mass. Luckily drafting witches was not done, because back then it was unthinkable to send women off to war. But if they had, the magical race of man would unquestionably have died out.

As it was, magical society went through another huge dark age. While not quite as bad as the fall of Rome, it was perfectly awful enough. Anybody with training got drafted, and most wizards barely knew how to use a wand before they saw battle, ending up with a sword through their gullet before they'd figured out what was going on.

Naturally, fewer and fewer magical mothers wanted their children getting drafted and sent off to die in some pointless exchange. So they stopped reporting their children to court. They also started to warn their boys away from royal service as sternly as they could, and those that did not succeed in convincing them saw their sons die, so witches shared what worked among themselves so their sisters and friends, cousins and aunts would not lose their little boys. A bare handful of copper coins was cold comfort to a mother weeping by her boy's tombstone. Thus, gradually wizards stopped appearing to volunteer their service at courts.

But while they saw wizards as cowards, and easily broken, magicals did have their uses, and an unwilling conscript could still be turned into an adequate soldier. So when wizards stopped showing up and volunteering, the kings went out actively looking to draft them into service whether they wanted to go or not.

So the magicals turned from merely not volunteering into actively hiding as kings began to feel the lack of the magical skills they'd begun to rely on and went searching to drag them off to war by their ears. Since every wizard to report for duty got used up to the point of failure, like any other weapon, soon the only ones left were the ones who didn't care to be found. And then the ones easily found got found and used up, so soon magicals became very adept at disappearing whenever the king's press gangs showed up.

Wizards still appeared and wandered around town when they wanted to. After all, there was no anonymity in a medieval world. There were few enough people around, and since nobody did any amount of travel to speak of, everybody knew everyone they were liable to meet. Strangers stood out. But they had goods to sell and things to buy, so the magicals often went out to market, or to a pub, just like anybody.

But a strategy of 'gone when you are looking, there when you are not' is inherently unsound. Tempers last, especially among defied monarchs. Going out among the peasants when the king was angry with you was liable to end up in attacks by bounty hunters who would be paid in gold for delivering you. So, since they got tired of being fined, jailed, or tortured for draft avoidance, magicals just started doing business with each other more and more so they didn't have to go out among their mundane neighbors as often.

And resentment began to build between the mundane peasants, who had no choice but to send their sons off to die in their lord's futile little border wars, and the magicals who began, by and large, to avoid them. So the muggle bounty hunters tried harder, getting angrier, so in return the wizards took better care to avoid being seen around their mundane kin.

Magical people soon started to see to their own needs, trading their own farm products and spells among each other. And, like any isolated community, specialists began to appear so you could go to someone to buy new shoes, or whatever.

For the first time in history, magical and mundane worlds started to truly pull apart. They were not fully separate yet, mundane wives could still find someone to go to when they needed a spell or a potion for this or that trouble, but it was the beginning.

Magical villages began to form, completely separate from their mundane kin, and yet very oddly like them. Magical culture, art and styles of dress hadn't changed much since, which, oddly enough, eventually became one of the greatest differences between the magical and mundane worlds.

Because the mundanes changed. They changed A LOT! And at least at the start that was all driven by their ruling court fashions. Ostentatious displays of wealth were a big part of how the nobility showed they were separate and different from the lower classes. Fashion was a big part of that, and the single biggest aspect of fashion lies in one thing - change.

Clothes changed, colors changed, food changed, hairstyles came and went and every step of the way the serfs followed as best they could in the steps of the nobles. It was not long before there became real differences in the styles of the mundane world, which followed after the courts seeking for their favor, and the magical worlds that didn't.

Of course this separation was not as clean or as easy as it sounds. Wizards are not, and never have been, a homogeneous bunch who shared the same universal opinions. There were many who felt differently than the rest, or disagreed with the way things were heading, or just plain felt the others were being disloyal to their crowned heads of state.

Naturally, most of these dissenters went out to go tell the king about it, and armies followed them back, leading to surprise conscriptions and imprisoned dissenters.

Most often, this led to the misguided 'patriot's' family, friends, and neighbors either dead or in chains. And, of course, not even the most authority-loving, brown-nosing toady in the universe is happy when he feels he has been betrayed like that. He only went to the king in the first place because he trusted him to make things right, not eliminate his entire village.

And, needless to say, it is hard to get a girlfriend when you've been the one responsible for seeing all of her male relatives dragged off and either slaughtered in war or imprisoned.

It makes the witches downright frigid, it does.

Still, enough young idealists tried foolish actions along those lines that the magical presence soon faded from the regions closest to their local monarchs. If it took the king a day or two to ride at the head of his knights to slay or conscript you, and your crystal ball could get warning of this, that was a day or two you had to get your people out before disaster struck.

Pretty soon they had an acceptable balance, where the social stigma of those who tried to sell their communities out to their kings was bad

enough that few were fools enough to try, and they had a sufficient distance and warning set up to cancel the efforts of those that did.

Magical communities existing, while not exactly in secret, at least in seclusion, not getting along with their mundane neighbors and essentially turning inward to ignore the outside world's concerns was the start of what would become the modern magical world.

The elements were all there. They just hadn't developed fully yet.

Describing things up until that point was, with some school-specific references, the bulk of what got covered in the first volume of *The Rise And Reign of Beauxbatons*.

The school itself was the subject of the second volume of the set. The building was an old one, actually predating the fall of the Roman Empire by quite a few hundred years. It had been established in the first place as a small temple servicing several nearby country villas for wealthy Roman senators, a comfortable distance from Bordeaux in the Aquitaine region. With the fall of the Roman Empire this became a small, self-serving community and one of the most stable islands of sanity and order around.

It had been fashionable for some time to brag that one's country villa was a self-sufficient entity unto itself, making everything they used right there on the property. No quality could have been more perfect to survive the otherwise all-encompassing collapse of Empire, and a neighborhood of these made things downright cozy for a while.

They also had enough warning of the impending collapse to make preparations for it, and the forests surrounding this area got seeded by the local chapter of the Roman Pantheon with the various magical beasts at their disposal. So, even though Legions were no longer available to protect them, a few manticores would do.

Thus sheltered, they never fell as far as the rest of the formerly Roman communities. Very few of the senatorial families who owned these villas managed to reach the estates in the final days of chaos and invasion of the Empire, so the mundane servants who ran them came after a few generations to regard them as their own.

This could have been the start of greater things than it was save for the fact that their control over the magical beasts released as guardians was not as great as they had hoped, and a couple of manticores eventually hunted them all to extinction.

But the buildings remained, and as the centuries passed, the high concentration of magical beasts in that forest dispersed, until finally in the tenth century those well preserved ruins got discovered by wandering magicals in search of places to hide from the press gangs of their king. It took very little effort at all for their spells to clean up living spaces, repair neglect and prepare the buildings for habitation. Thus a whole new community was formed, and the first time a king tried to send soldiers to recruit from their ranks, his troops got eaten by a dragon on their way through the surrounding woods.

Thus began a long tradition of cultivating the natural and magical hazards in a buffer zone around the settlement, eventually leading to legends of an enchanted forest where no knight could go without encountering adventure (often fatal).

This privacy and lack of interruption by outside parties finally restarted magical society in earnest. Though the scrolls they discovered there were decayed and old, and the Roman scholars were not nearly so obsessive about recording every detail as the following cultures would have liked (they preferred a people teaching people approach rather than a books teaching people one), still, from the records discovered there began the first big resurgence of Roman magical knowledge.

It was also, incidentally, this and other finds like it that firmly established Latin as the language of magic throughout Europe, as opposed to the language that everybody spoke. Which is ironic, in a way, because those Roman magicals used Latin because it was the language everybody spoke. It was far more impressive to command a stone to rise, and have it rise, so the public can see you can command the very elements, than for you to be blurting out obscure gibberish at it.

Besides, back in Rome the language of education and sophistry was Greek. So if they'd wanted their spells to be incomprehensible to the common people that is what they'd have used, and therefore what their modern descendants would be using.

This foundation of magic gave rise to a community of spell users so much in advance of the rest of those in those territories that would later become France that the inhabitants came to be called Beauxbatons, or Beautiful Wands, for their comparatively amazing magical skill. And the place name and the people name mingled, as they often do, until they were one.

This naturally led to flocks of magical immigrants of every kind, hoping to study there. This was somewhat disgruntling to those who saw themselves as competitors.

For the longest time the Aquitaine region was its own separate political entity from the rest of France, so there was something of a competition between the Paris magical facilities for training young witches and wizards, and those at Beauxbatons. However, those at Paris were far less secure from their local monarch, and combined with the lack of the facilities and records rediscovered in the Roman settlement at what became Beauxbatons, it was the Parisian wizarding school who came out the worst in those competitions.

Thus, it was with no small amount of glee that Parisian wizards consolidated their faculty and students together at the facilities of Beauxbatons upon the marriage of the Duchess Eleanor of Aquitaine to King Louis VII of France in 1137. They felt they had a certain amount of egg on their faces when her marriage was annulled in 1152; and when she married King Henry II of England in 1154 they felt downright abashed. Still, the schools had been combined and there was little that could be done without severe damage to both institutions. Although the Paris facilities had been retained and used as an annex, they were no longer sufficient to run a school from, so education continued on at Beauxbatons.

Luckily for the French, the colossal mismanagement of Prince John when he ascended to the throne of England lost the English all of

their French holdings, and the embarrassment of French magicals being educated at English-owned establishment came to an end.

Things continued on pretty smoothly until 1560, when a witch who had married into Spanish nobility, and whose family had become fantastically wealthy from all the gold and treasures being brought back by the conquistadors, bequeathed a vast fortune on Beauxbatons for the express purpose of modernizing the somewhat decayed campus and expanding their facilities. In response, many buildings were named after Adelaide De Basque in her honor.

In truth, the fortune she'd bequeathed them was so vast at first there was a great confusion over how to use it. That was settled by the Headmaster of the time, a Ferdinand Delacroix, who decreed that Beauxbatons must have only the best. Thus began a process whereby they identified the best painters, architects and sculptors of their time (virtually all of whom were muggles), and hired them secretly away, faking their deaths in the muggle world so they could devote their time fully to serving the magical one.

The pay and benefits offered were so large very few refused. Most merely saw it as a change of patronage, and no muggle potentate could offer them the tools or comforts a magical one could. Those who did refuse forgot wizards even made the offer, thus marking the beginnings of the practice of controlling muggle knowledge with spells to ensure the safety of the magical one.

This pattern of kidnapping artists and faking their deaths had already been established to a small degree when an Italian wizard and fan of his works had hired the painter Raphael away from the muggle world at the age of thirty-seven. But this wizard was persuaded to lend him to the reconstruction of the school.

Thus Beauxbatons began their search for the best, and Michelangelo became the principle architect and designer of the new campus, spending sixteen years of his life on the work and setting them firmly ahead of all other magical institutions as far as culture and beauty of the academy and their architecture.

The great alchemist Nicholas Flamel was persuaded to extend the lives of these talented men by a dozen years in each case, so they could devote the extra time to their work on his alma mater. It was also due to the efforts of providing skilled magical assistants to these famous men that the program of arts at Beauxbatons became firmly established, and has been running uninterrupted ever since. The Flamel building, built in his honor, where study of Potions is centered has also had a run of successes in its long history.

In a strange reversal, the great architectural achievements of the height of classical France were a dim reflection of those at Beauxbatons, based on concepts brought out by squibs seeking work as artists in the muggle world.

Leonardo da Vinci was the last of the great Renaissance men to contribute substantially to the completion of the newly rejuvenated school, placing his mark upon it by the many varied devices he contributed, including mobile fountains wandering the grounds, floating just a few feet above the grass, a dumbwaiter system that not only used tiny elevators in the walls, but also a small railroad under the floors for picking up and delivering snacks, laundry or teaching materials, and many interesting flying machines that have become the height of popularity in their own interesting races.

A great many whirring steampunk devices have been tucked into odd corners of campus by him, many fanciful, some functional, and a few even for use as pranks on guests.

The enchanting program was also begun in his honor.

The school brought about on the foundations of its Roman past, the donations of Adelaide De Basque, and the inspired leadership of Ferdinand Delacroix, together with the work of famous Renaissance men and artists, has continued along strongly ever since, and France sees no reason why this great institution should ever fail. In fact for centuries it was so prosperous that it bought up many of the surrounding farms outside of its barrier forest, and began to work them to supply itself and the French magical community.

Today those farms still serve the school and magical community, and are protected by the same charms the English use to drive muggles away from their Quidditch stadiums. In fact, they were pioneered here by the French. No muggle roads lead into this area, nor does it appear on any government map, although it can be driven to if one knows the right muggle garages to turn into, and keep on driving through what appears to be the back wall - charms in this case copied from the English who use them at King's Cross Station for foot traffic.

Thus this unplotable stretch of French countryside is not only idyllic, but one of the largest muggle-free zones in Europe, and the heart of their magical community, with many small villages in addition to the school and its environs.

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Author's Notes:

The great difficulty about moving Harry to any other magical school is that we know so little about them - nothing more than a name, in some cases. So I started to put this together.

Strangely enough, I also got in contact with Skysaber, who was doing much the same thing with the Salem Witch Academy for a story of his: Azalea Potter, and we were able to help each other out with ideas.

We also agreed to post these histories separate from the stories they appear in as fan resources so anyone can use them in their HP fiction.

Chapter Seventy-Five by Lionheart

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Sybil's first thought about reproducing the results of the ancient witch Luna was related to who'd raised Rapunzel was that playing around with magical herbs was Pomona Sprout's job. That was her area of expertise, and she'd be only too happy to leave it to her. But Professor Sprout smartly responded that in areas such as this, neophytes succeeded more often than experts. So by the Herbology teacher's orders, ALL the dryads began to grow patches of experimental rampion and other herbs, hoping among them to duplicate the ancient witch's results.

Sybil, while not exactly excited by this, went along with it anyway. After all, the knowledge of how to properly care for highly magical plants was hardly useless, seeing as how she was one herself now.

Their training and advancement was also continuing on in other ways. It had been fairly easy to get centaurs around Beauxbatons to teach them archery. All they'd had to do was repeat the original offer Firenze proposed: a bow of dryad wood in return for lessons for herself and her friends.

The French centaurs had leapt on her offer, and their training continued.

Sybil's government duties continued, although she had little enough idea just exactly what she was doing some of the time. Oh, she was fine on her duties, those were going just fine. it's just odd things happened now and again that she could not explain.

Just one example - she'd been riding in a motorcade with the American President John F. Kennedy shortly after having made her offer to fund the space program (having displaced the Governor of Texas, a Mr. John Connally, in the President's car - who would have been her replacement if she couldn't make it) when some shots rang out.

Nothing had happened. They'd all been stopped quite effectively by her anti-bullet shield. Only the crowd and the secret service and all sorts of people went nuts about it. That seemed fairly normal, actually, it was the twinge as her fairy powers exerted themselves covering a minor (for her) timeline switch that confused the witch.

She never learned that she'd accidentally foiled the Kennedy assassination by her presence in his vehicle at the time. The American Secret Service had fun arresting people and running investigations, though.

This luck of hers would later reverse itself in 1981, when Trelawney was fretting on the 29th of July in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, having been trapped by a wedding invitation she'd not been able to get out of when she'd much rather have been helping the other dryads set up arrangements around Harry - whose family was due to be assassinated in two days.

For Sybil this was something of a crisis. Harry was about to be put in the worst danger of his young life, and she was shanghaied by politics! Outrageous!

But she was a worldwide political figure, and a celebrity because of the space race and other things, so she'd been asked, and in such a way that she couldn't get out of, to see Prince Charles marry some Diana Spenser lady. So she managed to slip it in, rearranging her other plans to make room, so that on the day of she cut off her shopping trip in Diagon Alley in time to come see the royal wedding.

Still, the wedding was nice enough, as far as such things go.

She was just starting to get into it, no longer plotting to slip out a side door and return to her shopping for needed articles at Diagon Alley, when shortly after the exchange of vows a Death Eater who'd followed her from the Alley, and who had NO comprehension of what was going on (but, as the presence of Crabbe and Goyle, both junior and senior, showed, Death Eaters were not always rigorously screened for their mental abilities) decided that he didn't like the look of a witch attending such an obviously muggle party and started throwing curses about - dropping Prince Charles with an Avada

Kedavra before switching over to multiple Reductos tossed about for flavor.

He was taken down in less than ten seconds by muggle security. It would have been a tenth of a second, but the security cordon was toughest outside of the building, aimed at preventing such characters from even getting inside in the first place, and their bullets wouldn't stop him.

Exactly why they wouldn't, and where the bullets fired went, would remain a mystery for years, as would how the man even got inside at all. They couldn't know he'd used spells to do it, so all sorts of conspiracy theories abounded. But it didn't stop the Death Eater from going down to countless angry fists.

However, the fact that he had a thick, Russian accent (having been a native, recruited after having gone to Durmstrang) didn't help the political situation a bit - made even worse by the fact that he escaped mere hours after capture, and before a full and proper interrogation could be carried out.

But they had a name, and a town of origin (both Russian) and a date at which he'd been spirited off to a secret training facility at age eleven.

A native Russian speaker killing the Prince of Wales at his wedding, and so many clues about his having a spy ring to get him there, then out again, did nothing good for Anglo-Soviet relations. Not even when the Dark Lord fell a few days later and Death Eaters began to be rounded up, and Sybil was able to both collect and produce the body of Prince Charles' murderer (having explained she was the original target of the assassination, and the agent had made a second attempt, getting killed by her security in the process) did it get any better. The two nations actually went to war over the subject - all because of some careless Death Eater thinking muggles were beneath him.

Luckily the war was brief and didn't destroy much on either side. Princess Diana, the Widow of Wales, also went on to become a popular royal figure.

Sybil's luck, past and future, with royal assassinations aside, a lot was going on during those years.

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"So I can be as pretty as you?" Lily blurted, excited at the dream come true.

Sybil laughed at the child's question as she ruffled the girl's hair, her three younger brothers dashing about with the excess energy of the tremendously young. The eleven year old girl had for nearly five years been the oldest child of Joan and Edmund Evans, as ever since the boys started to be born and showed signs of accidental magic, Petunia's jealousy had grown so strong she'd been sent off to live with her grandparents, before getting shipped off to a cousin she'd never heard of - but Petunia liked the 'normal' life so much she'd never come back.

So, for years now the Evans family had been Joan and Edmund, their oldest girl Lily, three rambunctious little boys after that, and finally now one final baby girl they all doted on.

Each and every last one of the kids displayed signs of accidental magic.

On the eve of Lily getting sent off to Hogwarts (despite the family living in one of her own little magical villages in Cuba) Sybil had arrived to see the girl's secrecy oath sworn to so she didn't reveal anything by mistake. And, to make it seem more of a celebration, had been sharing stories and secrets so the girl understood more of what she was protecting.

Sybil had just explained about them all becoming dryads when the green-eyed girl repeated her oft-delivered question about wanting to be as pretty as her parents' best friend. Although this time she did it in a different form.

"So, you're going to give us a dose of this dryad cordial? The girls, I mean?" Lily bounced up and asked excitedly, eyes all aglow as she saw her hope real.

"Uh, no." Sybil considered. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?" The redhaired witch was now confused. Being as pretty as Sybil was everything she'd ever hoped for. She'd memorized all of her course books by heart to know as much magic as she could, hoping to be like her role model, and now...

She COULDN'T be refused now! It wasn't FAIR!

Lily's lip began to quiver as she threatened to cry out her disappointment.

The oracle blushed red. "Well, I sort of slipped into the mixture a dose of Bride's Delight, charged for Harry."

Lily's face turned red, a mixture of shock and embarrassment.

"And it just seems all kinds of wrong to feed that to you..." the divination professor continued awkwardly. "You being his mother, and all."

Lily's face was now purple. Her face got angry, and she ground out between clenched teeth, "So? You're just going to mix up the antidote, aren't you?"

Trelawney blinked in shock. "There's an antidote?"

Little girl Lily exploded like a hurricane. "Of COURSE there is an antidote to Bride's Delight! Everything except for the Unforgivables has a counter! YOU were the one who taught ME that!!"

The oracle sweatdropped. "Well, there's really another part," she confessed, wincing. "You see, dryads can only have daughters. So if you took the cordial you couldn't be Harry's mother anyway. And we sort of need him."

III

There were some things that not even time travel could change.

A person was shaped by the choices they made. Other people could exert influence over what choices were available to them in any number of ways, but the choices were always still up to them to decide. Most often people tried to maximize the available good choices and minimize the bad for those they loved around them. However, no matter what the proportions, there were always good and bad choices available to select from.

Most people select a broad mix of choices, good as well as bad. Sooner or later most of them regret the bad ones, but by then the damage is done. A few have strong enough moral character to select mostly good choices. We ought to celebrate those people and call them heroes. A few prefer to take bad choices. Those people, whether they believe it or not, are life's villains - as these are the ones primarily causing hurt, pain and suffering to others.

One thing not even magic could do was to take away someone's ability to choose. You could prevent them from acting on those choices. You could cloud their mind and inhibit their reasoning, or even cause them to forget the reasons why they might want to choose a certain way, even cause them to mistakenly believe they'd already chosen another way; but while those limited a person's ability to make choices, it did not, could not, eliminate it entirely.

And a person is defined by the choices they made.

You couldn't do anything to help a person who always made bad choices. You couldn't MAKE them into a good guy if they were unwilling. Even with time travel the best you could do was to change the selection of choices before them and hope they chose differently this time.

The case of Severus Snape both changed and it didn't. His father did die and he did get sent to an orphanage, where the bullying he received from his attitude and his eternally runny nose approximately equaled the abuse he would have gotten from his father.

A bit less, actually.

But the fact of the matter was, he would have turned out much the same whether he was treated well or poorly. He was one of those people whose personality dominates despite their environment, and he loved bullying. So he would have sought an excuse to do it regardless. Even had he been Obliviated of every memory of his father and lived a pristine life in a perfect home with saints for parents, he would still have chosen some awful figure as a role model to emulate and pattern his life after, and the worse they were the better he would've liked following their example.

I have seen those people, near perfect backgrounds they utterly disregard in their search to be evil morons.

You can't MAKE someone be a good guy. It doesn't work like that. They have to choose it. And Severus, in his previous life, had had plenty of chances to choose the Light and didn't take advantage of any of them. He never chose to do the Right thing. At best all he ever did was to do the Selfish thing (even in the mainline, his 'last sacrifice' could be seen as simply striking back for revenge at the enemy who killed him - and no, if I dated someone then broke up I wouldn't want them killing the person I eventually married, and my child by them. So his 'love' for Lily makes him more creepy, not less). So giving such a person more or better chances wouldn't mean anything, since they wouldn't take any of the good ones they already had.

So losing his father actually changed Snape very little. Losing his MOM, on the other hand, cut him off at the knees and made him far less powerful than he was before the dryad's little jaunt through time, as his anger at his father did not have the convenient outlet of studying books on curses until he was one of the most dangerous little sociopaths ever to enter Slytherin.

No, this runny nosed little hard-eyed boy did not know about magic until he got his Hogwarts letter. Nor did he have extra money to buy more books than were on the curriculum, which limited his study of the Dark Arts.

He was still the same person inside, having consistently made bad choices out of the different selection he'd been offered. He was just less powerful than before.

Asking a mother to stay around and shelter him, when he'd become an exact carbon copy of the person she was sheltering him from, would be an insult to the sacrifice she'd made for him, and a waste of both her tears and effort.

It would be asking her to sacrifice and suffer for nothing. She stuck with him in the mainline, and he turned out awful in the mainline. Having her around had not helped, it just gave him extra fuel on his course to be bad.

Trelawney did end up visiting the moody brute one more time, having set tracer spells to alert her to when he stopped qualifying as innocent (not able to help herself after recalling more of his outrages). So she swooped in on him as he'd joined a bunch of older kids at the orphanage smoking cigarettes and passing around porn when he was eight years old.

When she left, he was not just a runny nosed boy. She'd gotten him to use that waffle iron like she'd originally intended (unable to bear the thought of future mini-Snapes - she'd even saved the waffle iron his mother left behind so he could use it for this purpose) and given him curses both to stutter, and be palsied in his right hand so it was eternally shaking.

Once more this failed to change him. It only reduced his power.

Really, all this did was delay him. Once he got to Hogwarts Madam Pomphrey was able to cure his stutter (to her eternal shame, considering what he'd become) after his teachers brought it to her attention a short way into his first year (and Minerva McGonagall, who'd brought it to the nurse's attention, would never quite be able to forgive herself for that). But by then he'd taken to using his left hand for everything, and for Potions work or flying or other tasks requiring two hands, was simply taken as clumsy; so it was well into his fourth year before his palsy was noticed and taken care of.

The only result of this was that he was left handed, and he'd never mixed a potion successfully in his life. Four years of utterly failed attempts had so discouraged him they'd ruined his natural talent on the subject. And the only effect that had on the timeline was that he carved up fewer muggleborns for potion ingredients, and without him teaching the subject Hogwarts graduated over a hundred TIMES the students with a Potion NEWT.

The change to Snape's life, however, was minimal. It simply cost him a little prestige and kept him out of the Slug Club. Death Eaters relied upon others of their number to mix their potions for them, instead of him. Snape was still the same bitter, angry man he'd always been, just his reasons had changed. And he would have found a new set of reasons to be bitter and angry had he not had these ones. That was just his preferred way.

For all the talk of Destiny out there, most overlook that fact that certain people are just destined to be creeps. Change his circumstances however you liked, and Snape would still turn out largely the same as before. The essential nature of a thing does not change easily. A diamond dropped in a hog trough was still a diamond, while a turd set in silver was still a turd.

Some are born to be heroes, he was born to be a creepy stalker and a bully. He'd had countless opportunities to change that, and never did; and when it came right down to it, only his choices could really change him.

But while his essential nature remained unaltered, one could affect his toys and abilities rather easily. The delay imposed both by the lack of home study and the slow start at school due to his stutter rendering him unable to cast spells for the first few months also took him from dominating his school fellows to the bottom of the pack. Snape was no less evil, angry or bitter, he was simply a follower and toady like Pettigrew instead of an authority figure in his House. He'd suck up to those above him as eagerly as he'd browbeat and bully those unfortunate few who slipped below him.

Being a eunuch also meant he had no hormones to speak of so he did not develop like the other boys. His voice stayed high, and he got

overweight, ensuring that even after he no longer stuttered he was never liked.

This further developed his bitterness, but only to approximately the level it would have been in the first place. It failed to change his personality.

Coincidentally, he never ran into the Marauders, who felt he was below their level, so they never teased him. That group was out to hamstring the leaders of the junior Death Eater pack. They had no time to waste on side targets.

Snape still became a Death Eater, even a powerful one and a member of the inner circle. For all of his initial delays on studying the Dark Arts, he'd caught up fast, and soon equaled the terror he would have been in the previous timeline. He merely had less prestige, being ranked with Crabbe and Goyle senior, among the followers, rather than side to side with Lucius Malfoy.

And he still decided to hate Harry, this time for bringing down his Dark Lord.

Truly, about the only change in Snape's life was a bit less prestige and never having learned Potions, having hated the course and dropping it as soon as possible after having failed to mix a successful one in his life (he did still pick up a business in selling hairs of his classmates to use in pre-made polyjuice, only this time he did it as a way to strike back at those more popular than him by selling their images in a form of prostitution - as opposed to his reason in the mainline, which was... mostly the same).

For that lack of prestige or potion talent, Dumbledore was unable to make Snape Potions Professor or Head of Slytherin House. But he did just as well by making Snape his own personal secretary, whereupon he was able to bully the faculty and students just as much as before.

Of course, in the absence of Snape to fill those posts, someone had to teach Potions and Head Slytherin. Surprisingly, it was Narcissa Malfoy who got selected by the Headmaster in this case. She did a

mediocre job at each, and thus was far from the worst teacher at Hogwarts. Snape did so much bullying she didn't bother, disliking the association with him. However her skill at brewing potions quickly skyrocketed as Dumbledore relied upon her to provide more and more of his private, illegal potion needs.

He also quietly pressured her to start sales on the side, until Narcissa was providing half of the illegal potions in Britain, with a tunnel through the wards so that customers could reach her.

Strangely, as the Headmaster's Secretary, Snape did substitute teach for all classes on occasion - even Potions. The strange thing was, never having mixed a successful potion in his life didn't change how he taught that class even one bit. He'd still copy out the instructions from a textbook onto the blackboard, take points from anyone who dared to ask questions, and raved over the stupidity and worthlessness of anyone who did anything wrong.

That was his teaching style, and it didn't require him to know his subject.

All this meant, however, that the rest of the staff were unusually careful about not taking sick days whenever they could avoid them, or circumspectly arranging their own substitutes when they did, because none of them wanted Snape teaching their classes and setting them back for months.

Students who love their subjects learn them. Those that do not will not, and Snape never taught a class that didn't get some residual hate and anger against him, and by association the subject. He was almost guaranteed to drop a class a grade on their OWL or NEWT tests on any subject he taught because of their destroyed enthusiasm.

And Dumbledore not just ignored the complaints, but actively defended his man. So history, as is often the case, just took a different road to what was mostly the same place.

|||

The young Narcissa Black had a series of difficult choices before her. When she got awakened to her future memories her situation was mostly like that of the younger Trelawney - a future lay before her that she didn't like a bit.

Being the same age as Harry's parents (and several years younger than Lucius) she had not yet entered Hogwarts, and was strongly tempted not to, only she could tell ahead of time that change lay outside of her powers.

She had to go, whether she liked it or not.

Besides, she could already tell that future memories were not solid. They were not set, like remembering your past was. Right now she could recall learning things, in a hazy sort of way, but if she didn't actually learn them that knowledge would depart and she wouldn't have those skills.

More than that, if she didn't go she'd lose her close friendship with her sister Bella, and it was only through her that she'd met Harry. So not going was not a possible option for her, because her powers couldn't manage the stretch. Her future links to Harry Potter were tenuous enough as it was, and they had to be preserved or she wouldn't become a dryad and get those memories.

Besides, the teacher-dryad-clones at Hogwarts would be relying on her to get certain students into trouble so they could give them detentions right before their demises so they could safely switch them for copies. She couldn't do that if she didn't go, so a great many lives depended on her being there.

Marrying that self-absorbed little prick Lucius, however, was going to have to change, no matter how much it cost her! That was the single most horrible period of her life, and she wasn't going to repeat it willingly!

Not like she had much choice, however. That was another one of those things that felt like it would be too great a jump for her meager fairy abilities to carry her over.

Still, she would find a way. Somehow.

This wasn't just her future she was deciding how to improve, either. As the oldest Black sister she had certain options for influencing those around her. Among her sisters she was a leader, and could hopefully steer them around the worst obstacles that lay before them.

All of that meant she had to save herself first, though.

Well, that meant changes, and she might as well start. For one thing, she'd not be caught dead in Slytherin house this time! Hufflepuff sounded more appealing. Gryffindor was not an option, as that could only sever her links to her family, which she needed just now. So Ravenclaw it was going to be.

But even that felt like it might be too great a departure for her, costing her her close relationship with her favorite sibling and cutting off her future link to Harry.

Well, TOUGH! She'd find a way to MAKE it work! The inter-house politics of Slytherin were too time consuming a game for her to play... except that Harry needed her to know how to play them, because he was going to rely on her to be his voice in the political arenas, and those were just an extension of the political rivalries formed when the future leaders entered Slytherin.

Sigh.

Truly, this future knowledge seemed like more of a curse than anything. It was like she was facing a mine field, carefully navigating through a series of pitfalls, any one of which might mean her doom, and having to put up with wading through a sea of unpleasantness not to blow herself to smithereens!

She really hoped Harry appreciated the sacrifices she was making.

In the end the only thing she could think of was to have a simulacrum relive her old life almost verbatim, reinforcing those skills and memories she got through her future knowledge so she didn't lose them, while she changed her appearance and went on to become

Ravenclaw's top scoring student of her year. One of the great flaws of a simulacrum was they could not learn skills on their own, so she had to be present, absorbing the Hogwarts material so she didn't lose them - something that if it happened would render her double unable to continue its act. But at the same time social interaction was just a memory, and while it did that she could go over those interactions on her own while downloading her double's memories while they both slept, and her own mind would develop the social skills on its own from the information.

Not possible with technical or involved stuff, but girls rehash and chew over their social interactions with others all of the time, and it is from this review, retelling and replaying things over in their minds (and with friends, peer review was just as important, though in this case the other dryads had to serve as that, which they did admirably), that they get most of the details anyway. She saw enough of those people in the halls and at classes for the downloaded memories to seem real enough. So it worked.

A rough statue of snow animated by magic has no ability to bear children, though. Not even to provide potion ingredients to do so. So one fine night not long before the wedding, she went out polyjuiced as him to the muggle world, stunned a blonde prostitute, collected the necessary ingredients from her and left a generous payment.

Someday maybe she'd even inform little Draca that made her a halfblood.

On another note, this life was not without its surprises. One of those was when her sister Andromeda joined her real but altered appearance form in Ravenclaw this time around. She couldn't even think of what she'd said to influence the switch! But the two became best friends, despite Andromeda not recognizing her older sister as the friendly upperclassman.

The big change, though, was the Headbastard accepting her simulacrum in Snape's place as Potions Professor and Head of Slytherin House. The real Narcissa was kept busy day and night learning all of the things her double was required to know to fill both posts, not to mention the illegal potions she had to learn how to mix.

Still, that did end up with her becoming one of the best Potions Mistresses in Europe. Although even that had something odd to it, as she'd been expecting her real self to simply disappear after Hogwarts graduation, going off to pursue other opportunities, only her friends in Ravenclaw all expected to keep in touch. Most even wanted to work alongside her at the Ministry, and a few even had parents who owned businesses and offered her jobs.

It was oddly unsettling, yet strangely wonderful, to a girl who'd lived her life always following her parents directives to suddenly be so valued by her peers. But when Dumbledore became interested in following the career of this brilliant young Ravenclaw she knew it was time to bail, leaving behind a second simulacrum to do her job as clerk at the Ministry (Ravenclaws almost always had jobs below the Slytherins who worked there), so she could go off and do as the other dryads had done, picking up an education at Beauxbatons to confound what Dumbledore knew of her abilities.

Her Ravenclaw double had an 'unfortunate accident' shortly after failing to respond properly to Dumbledore's invitations to become his puppet. Truly, she didn't think she could keep up the act without him becoming aware that the personalities and abilities of his new female Potions Professor and Head of Slytherin House were awfully similar to his new recruit inside the Ministry.

And she just couldn't chance that discovery. So she let her Ravenclaw double die, killed by an accident arranged by him after she refused his service.

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Author's Notes:

Okay, nearly back to the present here, as I've almost dealt with what needed doing before I got back there. Just a few more situations to resolve, then we can pick back up with Harry and company.

And I hope to prove to you that the Beauxbatons material was indeed very relevant to this story and our main characters. That will just take

a while (but considering that on most stories you have to wait months for an update, and on this one you get them almost twice a week, it's not like you are suffering for lack of attention on the main characters).

Chapter Seventy-Six by Lionheart

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The plot to save Harry's parents was the most difficult and complicated thing the dryads ever did, and had its roots in the methods they'd worked out to save Susan Bones' family.

In Susan's case the family had to be believed to be dead, but the child live - fooling not only the wizarding public, but the Death Eaters who'd performed the attack.

Tricky.

It was further complicated by the girl going on to lead a somewhat public life. This was even more tricky, but not insurmountable. The real hard part was getting the child to grow up with her parents without the world realizing it.

Because there really was not much point in saving her parents if she couldn't get to enjoy a childhood with them. That was when one's parents were most useful and needed, setting an example and teaching, playing with the child, forming the relationships that, if done well, last for a lifetime.

Not much point to having parents if they mean no more to you than a couple you met in a receiving line at a party somewhere. "Hi, how are you? Next!"

Once they'd worked that difficult situation out it took not much more for them to realize, "Hey, you know this covers Harry's situation rather well? Why don't we try applying this to him?"

And so, cautiously, they did.

They'd planned four public appearances per year for Susan, luckily they didn't have that burden with Harry, who'd disappeared from the wizarding world for ten years. So on that aspect alone this should be easier.

On the others? More complicated.

The rescue started a little over nine months before Harry was born, when the ghost of Ariana Dumbledore located Petunia Evans, who had managed to find and marry Vernon Dursley after all, and passed on her location to the rest of the dryads.

Bathilda Bagshot, whom everyone ignored because of the decrepitude of her advanced old age, and therefore was an extremely useful agent for getting things done under the radar, so to speak, then paid a visit to the young couple, got herself invited to tea, then dosed Petunia's cup with a potion.

Narcissa Malfoy (or Black, as she preferred to be known among the other dryads, claiming that Lucius' marriage to a walking pile of snow didn't matter for anything save disguise purposes) had whipped up a batch of that potion Draca had once asked for - the one for bearing twins.

This was a more limited version, providing one set of twins rather than a dozen. But slipped into her tea by an anonymous old lady when she was still so early that she didn't even know she was pregnant, Petunia never noticed (except to rave and complain that her delivery took a lot longer).

That accomplished the first stage, setting the scene as it were.

The second stage was a lot harder, as it required more than a deft touch to get it to where it didn't wipe them all from existence. It also required no small amount of cleverness and sneakiness.

Because Harry had always wanted to grow up with his parents, and anything he wanted they wanted, so were determined to give it a try. However this, unlike the fates of muggle political figures, impacted their own backgrounds in the most severe and complicated way, so it had to be done with precision. They would never even have tried it if they couldn't do it right.

Multiple years of performing divinations on this subject had revealed there was a way. Then (it was almost like cheating) they used their fairy powers to test plan after plan. They would start to commit to one, and if it felt like it was too much they would back off and start to commit to another, selecting broad courses of action that first lay within their powers, then refining that, ironing out the details until they had charted a course they knew would work.

They knew it would work because ones that failed felt like it was killing them just to start to progress along those plans.

So, yes, it did feel a bit like cheating. But it would work.

The second stage was to arrange for Harry's mother to protect him while still staying alive to raise him. His father was easy. One snow cone clone and they could pluck him out of there right away, months in advance if they felt a need to. All he had to do was face Voldemort and die.

Harry's mother had to protect him from the killing curse.

Though Minerva swore them all to secrecy, as this must NEVER be told to Lily, her opinion was that if Lily didn't love James there was no point in saving her. Harry would have been better off with another mother, and James with a better wife, IF that was the case.

Luckily it wasn't.

The rather minor fact that Lily started having kids right out of Hogwarts, giving Harry two older sisters, then continued on long after, made that clear. (Although she did warn James that if he wanted any sons they'd better get them out early, because after she hit thirty three the only thing she'd be having would be daughters, because she fully intended to be a dryad.)

There had been some danger of her being shallow enough to enter a marriage for love of the child instead of her husband, as they'd never made any secret to little Lily that her role was to have been Harry's mother. There are some women in that situation who'd go through the motions of marrying the correct man just to have the destined kid.

They'd all hoped that she wasn't that shallow, once they'd realized the danger, but some women were.

Once they'd realized that was a potential problem they done what they could to counteract it, introducing Lily to James as children so they could grow up as friends, having that long-term relationship that Lily had shown she was prone to in the first timeline. Only this time they gave her one that wouldn't be betrayed by the other party.

James wasn't like that. Pomona often teased Minerva that he'd been Sorted incorrectly, as the Potter heir clearly had at least as much Hufflepuff in him as Gryffindor. James stuck by his friends no matter what.

In the first timeline he'd met some other kids on the train and struck up a partnership based on that alone, then stuck with it. He'd stuck with Remus in spite of him being a werewolf. He'd stayed by Sirius in spite of his Dark family and the efforts they made to 'reclaim' him from the Light. He'd even stuck with Pettigrew even after it became clear the lying sycophant was a toady and hanger-on rather than the friend and equal he'd been looking for.

It didn't matter what, James stuck by his friends, and what's more he MADE those friendships work! It would have been easy to drift away after some of the things they'd done. Heck, many of the closest school friends simply drift apart after graduation, never truly being close again.

Not so with the Marauders - and that was because of James. He stuck by his friends, and his principles, until the very end.

He was, without a doubt, the very Heart of the Marauders. So long as they had James, they'd be a team. Unfortunately, the Headbastard saw that too, and he had use for the members of that group being fractured and thus subject to manipulations, so tore the heart right out of them deliberately.

Dumbledore could've arranged quite easily for Lily to be home alone on that fateful night. It would have been as simple as calling her husband away for an Order meeting, as Albus already knew when the

attack was to take place. It was hard not to, when he'd arranged the whole thing himself via Trelawney dropping a false prophecy he'd composed to a known Death Eater agent.

Besides, no one had ever said James' sacrifice was needed for anything. No one had even claimed that his brave last stand had accomplished anything useful. They didn't even give him credit, despite how a lesser man would've run out the back door and not stopped til he fell over from exhaustion.

He stayed and died, even when he didn't have to; but Lily got all of the credit.

A man like that should not be wasted on a wife who doesn't love him. Harry also deserved better than to have parents in a dysfunctional relationship. He could not be raised the right way if they were.

Children learned how marriage should work by watching their parents, and if he learned a bad way of treating his spouse, all of those who hoped for cuddles would regret it, so it was IMPERATIVE that he learn the right way!

But it was more than just their cuddles on the line. Harry was the linchpin and key of the entire process, the leader of their side in this war. The dryads couldn't kid themselves; while they might be important, and have skills that had been increased, theirs was not the most vital contribution. Harry was the leader, and if they wanted to be the True Light, he had to reflect that.

He did in the mainline, so they did not worry overmuch, as he was almost an anti-Snape, having a sweet disposition and Light personality that triumphed over his environment despite the long odds.

But they didn't want to mess him up, just on principle.

Actually, using the tool of, "if it doesn't work, it will hurt, so we'll know ahead of time not to do that" they were able to parse through a ridiculous number of plots, some of them quite absurd.

Everything the dryads knew about the blood protections was based on the word of one man - Albus Dumbledore, whom they knew to prefer lies to the truth in every instance and circumstance.

Harry would probably know, having Riddle's memories about all things dark and dangerous, but he wasn't there to ask. So it was a good thing they had the tool of 'gee, that hurt, so it must not work' to use to test ideas on.

One of the more intriguing, and astonishingly successful, ploys was suggested by Luna's mother Selene (who'd showed up uninvited one day and simply began participating as though she'd been involved all along), that of substituting a transfigured dairy cow for Harry's mother. After all, she explained, the requirements said *A* mother's love, not *Harry's* mother's love! And cows had to give birth before they gave milk, just like any mammal. Confound it to think Harry is her calf. Then when she dies it has an added benefit that you can reverse the transfiguration and chop her up into steaks and eat her. Maybe even include a transfigured stag for James, that way you can have beef and venison at the same feast celebrating the Dark Idiot's downfall!

Not a few of the dryads felt completely weirded out by this argument.

A number of far more logical and reasonable suggestions got pounded to death by debate, until finally they went with her ridiculous one just because they knew it would work without excessive risky chances, inventing whole new spells, costing Harry that protection, or actually letting Lily die.

So the event went forward. Voldemort fought two transfigured animals who never got off a spell (because they couldn't) Harry got marked, the spell reflected, and then got quickly spirited out of there leaving a simulacrum baby in his place.

Hagrid would never look too closely, and Dumbledore would be paying all of his attention to the leftover magical traces of the fight, learning what he could of Harry's marvelous power to reflect killing curses by faint magical energies lingering around the site.

He'd never even see the baby until it was time to put him on the doorstep.

Then, once Fumble-more arranged with Hagrid to drop off little baby Harry at the Dursley's doorstep, and once the old coot was gone, McGonagall (who had excused herself to the powder room) simply released the spells causing the rough statue of snow to simulate a child, melted the resulting snow and dried the basket, slipped into the Dursley's house and fetched Dudley's twin, gave him a disfiguring potion to look like Harry, and put him in the basket outside.

A few memory modification spells to the rest of the family, and rearranging the second child's bedroom to look like the storage room it originally was, and the Dursleys forgot all about their second child.

Since the memory modification spells were all performed the evening before, once the family had gone to sleep, no wand magic had to be performed in the area since Albus put up his wards there. So he received no notice of the switch. His spells were not put in place to watch Minerva, the only thing they would check her for was arrivals and departures from the general area, and then only because she was a witch.

So, on being out of there within a reasonable period of time for a bathroom break, NOT carry a child out with her, or any of the usual telltale signs he would think to check for, his wards provided him no alerts at all as to her activity.

So the Dursleys would get to raise their own child as they would have treated Harry - quite the poetic irony.

Of course, it wasn't as simple as all that. They had to do one little thing more, and that was Bathsheba Babbling, their Ancient Runes professor, had to visit the family in the preceding weeks along with Poppy, to open up the skin around the head of Dudley's twin and scribe some runes lightly on his skull. Nothing harmful, merely a variation on the runes used to create a pensieve, storing all of the child's memories magically for later retrieval.

Dudley's twin wouldn't be changed by this, but it would be necessary for later. Because right now Harry was going to be raised in a loving environment by his parents, and have plenty of siblings, and that wasn't the history that led to them all being dryads. So just before his eleventh birthday, most likely on the Dursley's trip to the zoo (which was out from under Dumbledore's wards, so they couldn't report anything) they would switch Harry back in for Dudley's twin, his own memories sealed away and given a fresh upload of what had been recorded by Dudley's twin (they really should have bothered to learn the child's name), who could be relocated to an orphanage in the meantime until they needed him to sub for Harry again the next summer.

So Harry would show up all meek and impressionable, vulnerable and his mind an open book exactly as the Headmaster wanted him. And that way he could live those first two years of Hogwarts precisely as he had before, spending the summers off with his parents and getting fresh memory uploads from his Dursley stand-in before going back to school again in the fall.

Then once they'd reached the future he could be made to recall everything about his new life, raised by his parents as part of a big, loving family.

It was all a bit complicated, but this was a rather tricky operation in a critical field of vast importance to them. Substituting a simulacrum for Sirius just prior to his arrest, so it was a snow clone who went to Azkaban instead of him, was child's play by comparison.

Since Remus was going to drop out of society anyway, the three Marauders could all go live quietly in another country somewhere as neighbors, getting married to nice witches and raising kids just like anybody.

Fairies like Happy Endings, but they'd do with a Happy Beginning or two just fine, too. So they spread the joy and saved Neville's parents so he could grow up with them too, in the same enclave as the Marauders. Neville's incapacity during his first two years of Hogwarts could be explained by just sending a simulacrum in his place, as half

the knowledge and power of a strong and wise child resulted in a rather weak and incompetent one.

McGonagall, his Head of House, could cover for recharging the clone.

But when Harry rebuilt the minds of the two simulacrums of Neville's parents lying in St. Mungo's, he didn't quite get the servants he was looking for; the people he'd thought he was rescuing actually having happy lives elsewhere.

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And thus time passed.

Looking back on her experience, Sybil had to admit she'd had fun over much of her 'thirty years into the past' experience. She'd gotten educated, she'd saved tens of thousands of British magicals who otherwise would have died, and doing so she'd pretty much accomplished her designs.

Then, on rescuing them, she'd put her teacher dryads to work and trained up her kidnapped magicals to new standards with an eye toward being prepared in case of potential future conflicts with Dumbledore's Britain. It kept people from being bored as they waited for the time to pass, and one could never have too many Healers and Aurors on hand just in case.

Oh, there had been odd bits. That scheme they'd eventually worked out with Harry's parents, and little Harry, far exceeded anything she might've dared going into this. But it all worked out in the end.

Of course, there were also the many off bits no one had planned on, like one of the side effects of training so many magicals to be Healers and Aurors on her little tropical island had produced an unforeseen wrinkle - in that in order to learn, Healers had to practice, and at some point practice required sick or injured people to practice on, and magicals had only so many of those, so the program had been authorized to sneak into muggle hospitals to get some extra work done. After all, muggle got many injuries that wizards shared, cuts and broken bones and things.

They'd thought they'd been able to hide it just as they effortlessly hid so much else.

Not so. Or rather, not entirely. They'd never learned that some things are considered incurable in muggle medicine, so when Cuban hospitals started turning out cancer patients who didn't have a shred of cancer anymore, all sorts of people got interested.

Sybil was able to step in and claim 'state secret' as to the exact particulars, but soon everyone wanted to go to Cuba to get their cancer cured. Mindful of how much goodwill Dumbledore had earned passing out phoenix tears to get people feeling kindly toward him, she'd adopted much the same strategy and said her clinics would cure any cancer patient who could get to their island. They wouldn't even charge for the service.

Soon the afflicted were coming in from worldwide, everyone who could afford travel fare, and services began to be offered specifically to transport them back and forth. Even 'cancer tours' by travel agencies. All they had to do was get there to be cured. No one was turned away.

No matter how malignant, no matter how advanced, or invasive, or inoperable it was, if you had cancer they'd cure you in an hour or less, and do it for free. You'd get sedated, stripped of recording devices, wheeled in (a spell cast by a Healer-in-training) and wheeled out again. That's it, you're done. People who'd despaired of life walked out free and healthy in an hour or less.

This was naturally worth no small amount of global goodwill, although certain sectors of the medical industry had to change focus, as no one else had any market for cancer treatments anymore. The only thing they had against her was that she repeatedly refused to share the techniques for doing it.

One of Queen Sybil's innovative young Healers-in-training had even discovered addictions of all sorts could be gotten rid of by a properly worded Compulsion charm, so soon they were offering that service for free as well. It did not matter what you were addicted to: drugs,

alcohol, tobacco, pornography, or daytime soaps - if you got to them, they'd cure you free of charge.

Discovered when they'd cured the same smokers of cancer for the third or fourth time, this treatment got implemented with no less success, and again the world began to bless Cuba as the island of healing.

Naturally this lent Queen Sybil a kind of celebrity status usually reserved for legendary figures like Elvis or Bruce Lee (both of whom she'd met, and liked so much she'd offered to hire both of them. But only Bruce Lee took the job offered as her personal trainer, so long as he got to continue making movies on the side - but she was only too glad to offer him facilities to do so, utterly unaware that in doing so she'd inadvertently saved his life from the accident that had originally claimed it. She was just concerned with him teaching her and her fellow dryads how to defend themselves - although they to wear limiters to get down to human strength to do so, so not to arouse suspicion).

So grateful were the muggles that her reputation for providing free cures to the afflicted even began to eclipse her fame as the mother of space exploration, which was no small feat considering what they'd done with that.

Using Sybil's donations (and the fact that the Soviet Union had been in such a state of turmoil it could not propose the treaty that would have banned the drive) the muggles had given the go ahead to their nuclear pulse propulsion system, starting and receiving Orion nuclear pulse rocket missions out of a new base on a coral atoll in the Pacific Ocean, far enough away from anything in particular, and with prevailing winds such that radiation was not a problem.

One thing that must be understood about radioactive isotopes for that to make any sense: the most dangerous stuff breaks down the quickest. Oh, you might have heard of substances with a half life of a million years or so, but consider: there is only so much material there to shoot out as particles. If it shoots it all off in a second it'll fry anything nearby. If it takes a week or two to fire off one, then several more weeks for another, then it may as well not be firing them off at

all. The background radiation from solar energy is already more far than that.

Your microwave oven is a greater threat to world peace.

These particles were like a tiny gun with limited ammunition. Each 'bullet' was too small to matter individually, it was only when taken together were they any problem. So if it shoots off millions of those in a second you're toast, but it runs out so fast that a couple of seconds later it is no danger. And if it shoots off a particle every couple of years it does so little damage as to be ignored. Your body repairs worse than that all of the time. Your television does more harm to you.

So anything with a half life of a million years could as well be a chair. It's the stuff that burns out quickest that is deadliest. And, with a few days to waft before it got anyplace populated, the worst had already abated. So it was no more dangerous than firing off a solid fuel rocket that might go off course during launch and smash into a populated city (China has done this).

This remained the favored launch site up until they'd devised bombs without any of the dangerous radioactive fallout, consuming almost all of them within the explosion to make it bigger, rather the opposite of a neutron bomb. But by then they were already lifting up space stations whole, and proximity to the manufacturers was important.

NASA was only too happy to have other space resources in their collection to go along with that first space station they were so proud of, and were only too happy to expand on it to include necessary facilities for mission support as they probed deeper into the solar system.

A four thousand ton Orion spacecraft had a crew of more than two hundred and could make the trip to Mars and back in four weeks, and Saturn and back in seven months. It could also reach Pluto and return inside of a year. And that was only the beginning. More advanced ten thousand ton designs soon followed on the heels of that initial prototype's success.

Since the money to send them had all come from a sunken Spanish treasure fleet, the names of these vessels were often derived from notable pirates.

(Sybil had also accidentally started 'International Talk Like A Pirate Day' in the 70's.)

NASA had gleefully used these craft to send manned missions to all of the planets of the solar system, as well as the major moons and establishing a permanent base on Luna (Earth's moon). The data they brought back had been chewed on by eggheads the world over, discovering all sorts of nifty things. However the crowning achievement of the space program had been launching (with the accompaniment of endless fanfare, and close to a billion television viewers worldwide) four manned missions to Alpha Centauri and one to Barnard's Star, and a small unmanned Orion probe had been sent on its way to Sirius, the Dog Star.

One of the nuclear pulse rockets sent to Alpha Centauri, and the only one to Barnard's Star, were gigantic eight million ton Super Orion designs envisioned as interstellar arks.

Almost half of the forty four year expected travel time for the first mission to reach our closest stellar neighbor had elapsed, and the data sent back on approach was already the talk of the scientific community, overturning many long cherished opinions even as it offered exciting new possibilities.

Strangely, each time they sent a mission to someplace they hadn't visited before, Sybil would feel compelled to go to her tree, and there she would find another golden acorn, just like the first nine, hanging from her oak with the appropriate Greek symbol for their goal on it. She had presented each of these in turn to the space program controllers, and they gladly took along each one - even once she could no longer pay!

Frankly, there was enough of a sense of tradition about it they wouldn't want to go without one, even if they had to make their own (which wouldn't be the same, honestly! I mean, really! They would have none of the magic tricks that made them special or important!).

And her acorns were widely regarded as good luck charms by the spacemen, as no mission carrying one of them ever failed to reach their target.

No, NASA had been semi-officially using a golden acorn as a symbol for a number of years now. And even those secondary or follow-up missions that didn't carry an original one of hers carried a fake, a replica they'd made themselves such was the sense of good luck and tradition involved.

Most of the fakes had been returned after their missions and were housed in places of honor in various museums (after having been studied exhaustively to learn the details of the various effects of the voyage on them).

They also had easily a dozen space telescopes, each one bigger and more impressive than the last, and orbiting around three different planets - the better to triangulate ranges and such with. Also, the telescopes around Mars could observe things that Earth would not always be in a position to see.

The space telescopes orbiting Pluto were particularly prized for that reason.

However interest in space had begun to peter out. It was felt that everything had been done and public boredom had begun to set in since the next great landmarks, reaching the next solar systems over, were all a sufficient time period away for the common people to forget and lose interest. So despite the great work done by the floating space labs and even factories, funding had begun to disappear as focus moved to other things. There was even talk of closing some manned bases and mothballing some of their interplanetary Orion craft. And it looked like the manned missions to Sirius, Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani would never take place, as funding for completing the three partially constructed eight million ton Super Orions intended for the missions was delayed indefinitely as people quibbled over the eighty or a hundred year plus flight times. Research funds had also been cut off to the ramjet project despite its excellent strides, and the proposed antimatter rocket research program had been entirely shut down!

It was getting to the point where they could hardly afford a routine trip to Pluto anymore!

Still, NASA had achieved so much while they were out of the race that the Soviets did not even try setting any more records in space. All they ended up doing after their recovery was sending up spy and weapon satellites.

And EVERYBODY was doing that!

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Author's Notes:

Go look up Nuclear Pulse Propulsion or the Orion Project if you don't believe my numbers. That project was almost ready to go ahead in the early 60's, and got dumped only due to a treaty banning aboveground nuclear blasts. Otherwise we may very well have had permanent colonies on all planets in the solar system by now.

Oh, and Sybil wasn't able to help herself, and on the probe to Sirius she'd sent along a dog collar that had once belonged to Sirius Black.

Partially Kissed Hero
Chapter Seventy-Seven
by Lionheart

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Sybil Trelawney, Professor of Divination at Hogwarts and newly minted (and somewhat girlish) dryad had no sooner disappeared in a cloud of sparkles than Queen Sybil walked into the clearing. One could almost expect them to be completely different, considering the weight of accomplishments behind the one. However, the mischievous nature was the same, and a touch of the girlishness. She was just more adept at concealing her true nature, so did not immediately swarm all over Harry, in spite of thirty years or so of longing to see him.

So instead she merely walked up to him and took his arm, calmly smiling.

"What happened?" Harry demanded urgently, seeing the change.

"It worked," she replied with a casual shrug. Seeing his confusion, she raised her wand to remove the memory blocks on him.

It all came back in a rush. Everything. Suddenly he could simply recall a whole new life where he lived with his parents and many siblings. Sirius was there, as was Remus, along with their own wives and children in one great big extended Marauder community. Years and years of details and experiences once forgotten under magical suppression got recalled in detail as those blocks got removed at last for the final time.

It could have been a worse experience save for the fact that he'd been through all of this before.

In his new past he could recall his mother had doted on him, and his father was always proud of him - not because of his promised future, but because the boy was one of those types parents are often proud of. Harry took after his parents in important ways, which naturally pleased them. He was smart and capable, gifted and intelligent, and

loyal, and because of those he was often given extra lessons and more responsibility than his peers.

And he had many peers. The wolf animagus and werewolf impersonator that was Remus Lupin had married a pleasantly plump wife who'd always outshone her neighbors with her kind smiles and generous baking, and between them they'd had more children than any three of their nearby friends. That was hard to do, as Sirius and his wife had five kids, and James and Lily had seven, starting with Harry and his two older sisters.

Then you had to recall these families had been at the heart of a community of exiles, most of whom had had the close brushes with death that tends to make one desperate to connect to life in ways that often result in children.

There had been a population explosion, a boom of baby witches and wizards among those tens of thousands of rescued expatriates, and Harry was among the older children, so somewhat of a position of leadership among his many peers. His parents held important positions and he was a gifted child.

It was a dream life in many ways.

Of course the downside to living an easy life is those that do so tend to be very soft. A person grows by overcoming trials and difficulties, and floating along on easy street tends not to teach or mature one in some important ways. Children are born with selfish tendencies that have to be overcome. In point of fact, there are a rather large amount of flaws people are normally prey to, and overcoming those seemed, more or less, to be the point of existence. But, carnal creatures that most of us are, people are ill-inclined to change until they have a reason, and most often that reason comes only when we can no longer afford the luxury of maintaining our flaws.

Flaws inhibited performance and reduced our abilities. All of them do. But at the same time we are most often comfortable with keeping them around for a variety of reasons. It was only when challenged in difficult circumstances that required all our capabilities to succeed

that many of us finally mustered up the gumption to cast aside those comfortable old chains holding us down.

Strange, but people and societies have a marked tendency to grow the most while undergoing experiences of the least pleasant sort. Or, put another way, a tree that has to resist winds grows deeper and better and stronger roots. It was almost, to use a game analogy, like living things gained no experience from having a pleasant life.

No experience, no growth. No growth, no improvement in the basic creature. And unimproved people aren't worth much. Harry, far from being a bad lad, was also not as good as he might have been, either. Given time he could have gone on to become a decent adult, overcome hardships during later years to become a decent, well-adjusted person in time for having his own kids.

But it wasn't like they had a heck of a lot of time to spare. The sad reality was that he'd have to be meeting not one but TWO Dark Lords on more or less equal terms during the first year he could realistically be called a teen.

That called for rapid advancement, far too rapid to be normal. The regular sort of fine, upstanding member of society was insufficient for dealing with the difficulties that might well claim them all. That sort of person made for a great starting point, a foundation on which greater things might be built, but by itself it was not sufficient to meet the tasks they had before them.

So, shortly before the boy's sixth birthday the dryads (who visited regularly) decided that it was time that Harry get the then-current set of memories of his Dursley counterpart.

That had been the shock of his life to the young lad.

The young Harry had never been pampered, thankfully. Being pampered was poison, and fortunately for everyone his parents knew how to tell him 'no'. But there had been nothing in the young Harry's life to prepare him for the experience of reliving the memories of the boy being raised by the Dursleys.

Harry had been turning out depressingly average before the 'raised by the Dursley' experiences had been downloaded to him and gave him the shock of his life. Before that he'd not properly appreciated his family or his many brothers and sisters. They'd fought in the manner children often do, and he'd been proud of himself for his small victories in putting down the competition until suddenly he could recall the life of loneliness that was the Dursleys and done a complete turn-around.

Once more it was strange, but a complete life of hardship and suffering was no better for a child's development than too much ease. One might well say that too much rest without any work didn't accomplish anything, but likewise going the opposite route of all work yet no rest was no better, destroying the one doing the labor as they had no chance to recuperate. It was in the blend of the two that the real development lay.

There was a reason why those who have adventure crave stability, and those who have stability crave adventure and excitement. Those who lead peaceful lives often read horror, while those who lead horrible ones read fluff pieces.

Just like all soil and no water was as bad for plants as the reverse is, people had to have a blend of experiences in order to turn out properly, and having that life of suffering and hardship downloaded into the mind of the Harry who'd been living the pleasant life was enough to mature him rapidly.

Most people don't do things, especially difficult and uncomfortable things like growing up and developing self-discipline, until they have to. Sadly, just about every form of self-improvement was uncomfortable. A life of ease gives no reason to change, while a life of nothing but hardship gives no reserves of strength to do so. People juggling disasters had no time, either.

Harry was a strange boy in that he had an amazing capacity for overcoming adversity. But to grow from it he still needed nurture and support, both of which the Dursley experience was entirely lacking in - A lack that Dumbledore had been counting on.

But having seen horror first-hand was a great incentive to learn how to face it, so that when next you meet you won't be so helpless against it.

The life at the Dursleys was effectively identical to the mainline. Dudley's twin had been put under compulsions to act as though Harry would've in his place, and because of the potion they'd looked the same, so the life among that family had been identical for Harry's stand-in, and thus for Harry himself on receiving those recorded memories.

Once more the boy shuddered under the poignancy of the experiences.

The contrast between the two childhoods could not have been more extreme. The Harry raised among his family had everything he could desire - and not in a Dudley-type way, either. His parents were great people who'd tried their hardest, however it was colored by the fact that everyone among their small community had known Harry was destined for great things, and that had colored their treatment of him, allowing him to get away with more things than a child ought to have.

It was strange how the most effective lies always had a nugget of truth to build themselves around. Dumbledore had always held out in public that being raised among those who knew of his destiny would give Harry a big head, and Snape had propounded at length that Harry was a spoiled little prince. Neither had truly meant them, merely holding those out as excuses for their own blackhearted behavior. However they would not have made effective excuses had the reality of that danger not been there.

It had not been extreme. His parents were better than that, and knew that spoiling Harry would be counter-productive. James had known enough spoiled Purebloods to be horrified at the thought of that happening to any of his own children. Still, looking back on himself from the perspective of the poor little orphan boy raised by Dursleys, Harry had been shocked over how much he'd managed to take for granted.

The Harry raised by his parents had toys and free time and private lessons, friends and siblings and had no particular appreciation for any of it. Then the boy who would've done anything simply to know who his parents were got dropped into his head, and that gave him a decidedly different outlook.

The Harry from that time forth was kind and understanding, tolerant of the faults of his family and friends. He helped his mother in the kitchen, and with the experiences of the Dudley's live-in housekeeper and cook in his head, he was a marvel around the house. His room was always spotless and his sisters begged his mother to let him take over as family cook. But Lily wisely just smiled and added him to the rotation, insisting that his siblings still learn as they would all eventually have homes of their own someday.

Far from struggling against his siblings, (as is far too often the case) this Harry also devoted himself to their service, helping them out where he could and playing with them, reveling in the sensation of having them rather than viewing them as rivals for his parents' affection. Harry had as much of his parents' affection as he could possibly need, just doing those things that pleased them, supporting his mother and helping out his dad. Far from being a momma's boy, he was equally interested in doing anything that pleased his father, not only practicing sports and games to spend time with him, but also reading and studying those things that were of interest to him, following along in his father's footsteps to become more like him. And with each of these successes, he also brought his siblings along (as much as they would allow anyway), forging family unity unheard of by most people.

That new Harry also plunged into his private lessons with an enthusiasm that shocked those who'd known the laid-back kid from before.

It was the custom of magicals to tutor their own children in all of the basics before they got sent off to school to finish the rest; and there existed more than enough resources for this to make that easy, trivial really. As with most things in the magical world, their tools for something practically did the job themselves, needing only minor direction.

And for those who failed anyway, there were discrete remedies that could be applied to correct the situation. Language Lozenges taught reading and writing as well as speech, and there was another one for arithmetic, so between them the most ignorant savage could have been prepared for school. Of course that did not prepare them well, leaving out such things as a knowledge of history or current events so they understood the world around them, but it sufficed for lazy parents too busy to do a good job themselves.

However, for a motivated student determined to excel, there were more magical resources available than simply those to correct for a substandard upbringing. And the things that could be done with them were astonishing.

Magical portraits existed for more reasons in the magical world than simply as decorations or door guards (although they had slid into enough ignorance that was most of what they got used for). Possessing the personalities and most of the knowledge of the original, portraits of past individuals could make for surprising tutors, especially on the history and customs of their respective time periods. In truth, they made for a better way of recording knowledge than books, and the old family houses were lousy with them.

Since Dumbledore was using all the old Potter family properties for storage of illegal goods, they couldn't exactly use those paintings as teaching aids for Harry - That was actually a large part of the reason why the ancient wizard stole old family manors, as part of his mania for knowing all things and denying that knowledge in turn to others. The disappearance of those ancient collections of portraits hurt the general knowledge pool as much as his absconding with those ancient family libraries.

Every time he did it, the Master Manipulator held more repositories of the of ancient wisdom, and the world as a whole apart from him knew less. Both of those were ideal changes to make as far as Dumbledore was concerned.

But despite those efforts, there were plenty of other families as part of the refuge villages that had estates that were not so compromised. So Harry ended up learning a great deal from those.

Harry's sixth to eleventh years with his family were quite illustrative of the power of change of the determined human spirit. And, not accidentally, any hole in the knowledge base of what he learned at the Dursleys got paid special attention to. Harry was the only kid he knew who, at seven years of age, passed cooking school. He likewise received tuition on the finer points of home care, mending and tailoring.

Receiving yearly updates on the experiences of his Dursley counterpart kept the boy motivated to excel and appreciate all he had around him. The young Harry unquestionably became a leader among the local youth, and for the most part he succeeded in carrying his siblings along to success with him.

The family and the community were both much stronger for having had him in it, so much so that it was a grief to them to see him go off to Hogwarts where most of those kids could not follow - their whole families supposing to have been dead, and all.

For Harry's part it was a grief not to go to school along with all of his friends and siblings. His two older sisters were already attending the magic academy created to educate the Cubans, and the program there had been improving steadily since the dryads who taught there had sought so much to improve their own educations.

Most of the rescued British nationals had been through there for make-up courses, so all of the adults at least knew how to cast a decent shield charm and stunner (putting them MILES ahead of their countrymen back home). The place was already picking up a good culture and reputation, strictly among those that attended for now.

Albus kept his eye on the field of education, and it wouldn't do to let him know this place existed, as then he might start investigating where it came from and who attended, leading to the exposure of all sorts of secrets.

Still, for Harry this was a whole lot to recall all at once. Suddenly recalling where you left your keys was one thing. Just up and remembering a whole different life that until that moment you'd never lived (except, now because of time travel and manipulation of the past, he had) was another.

It took the boy a few moments to recompose himself after that. When he eventually did so and looked up he saw Hermione and Luna both recalling new lives as well.

He certainly had a good idea what was in them. Hermione's parents had been sought out by the dryads and encouraged to emigrate out of Britain with some lucrative contracts, with the ultimate aim of having their daughter grow up alongside of Harry.

Luna's father's frequent field trips now disguised the fact that he no longer lived in the country, spending much of his time out of it with his wife and daughter, publishing half of his papers from abroad. And this had been arranged for the same reason, so Luna and Harry could be childhood friends.

Susan was going through the same thing, as well. In fact, there were a rather large number of Hogwarts children that Harry knew out of his new childhood, many of which he'd never met at Hogwarts; although with some he had a nodding acquaintance, like with Dean Thomas.

Suddenly the boy felt deep and heartfelt gratitude that because of those Dursley experiences downloaded into him, he'd been so nice to his friends while growing up - because three of his most precious people had been among them! It would be embarrassing to look at the girl (or girls) you're going to marry and recall you'd been a beast to them all of your life.

He didn't know how people like Ron would manage it!

It actually surprised Harry how close he was with some of those people he'd never spoken with before. Hannah had also been included, not to disguise the loss of relatives as most others were, but in this case directly because the dryads knew how unfair it would be

for his other fiancées to grow up in that close acquaintanceship and not include her as well.

Of course, the girls had all gone through a period when boys were icky, and in fact that rather embarrassing segment came to a very embarrassing end only when Luna declared he was an honorary girl and okay to play with again.

Considering all of his sisters, and the fact that the all of the adults of the village did tend to encourage him to play with certain girls (namely Hermione, Luna, Hannah and Susan), combined with his eagerness to please, that Harry had played house and with dolls more than was probably healthy.

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Albus Dumbledore stood alone in a private ritual chamber, Moody having gone away after giving his report on the state of the magical world. Having his horcrux placed in a simulacrum body was working out just fine, although it did put his precious soul anchor in a bit of an exposed position, Dumbledore did acknowledge his servant's need.

Desperate times called for desperate measures, after all.

Speaking about that, the great wizard Albus Dumbledore did not plan for this horcrux to be exposed to danger for terribly long. That was what underlings were there for, after all.

And he had just the underling for this type of work.

After ensuring for the final time that the protections against escape out of his private laboratory were perfect, Dumbledore activated the rune array and the mighty obelisks regularly placed around the heart of the chamber glowed with internal light.

There were many such standing stone circles in Britain, and Dumbledore had made absolutely certain to monopolize the best for himself.

On the stone altar at the center of the circle, a figure woke and began to rise. As one of the newly risen creature's hands scrambled for a wand, and found one, Albus stepped forward as his most genial self.

"Alas, I could not obtain your original, however you will find a yew wand beside you that is as close a match for your original as Ollivander could make with a feather and wood from the original sources."

Inwardly gloating over the elderly man's stupid sense of fair play, Voldemort snatched up the device and stood. "So, you have come to interrupt my followers bringing me back from the grave?"

Albus gave the other dark lord a tolerant smile. "Oh, it was hardly the full beyond, Tom. You and I both know about your horcruxes. So we should not waste time pretending you were ought but a shade. And I fear I must correct you on a second point. It was not your followers who raised you. It was I."

Voldemort's surprise attack would have dropped many wizards out of sheer surprise. He didn't believe the old man for a moment, but having performed his internal checks and finding himself fully capable, rather than be played like a fool he resolved to end the conflict before it started.

The initial attack was astonishing in its vehemence. The Dark Slytherin had hated and feared this opponent for a long time and began with the intent of hitting so hard, so fast as to overcome his weak-willed foe before he'd had a chance to get his speech out, and therefore before he got his guard up.

Doddering old fool and his reliance upon rules. Patterns set for duels had no place in a real fight. Voldemort had killed enough dueling champions to be able to tell that better than anyone.

Stand and bow indeed!

No, the Dark Slytherin sprang into action. His yew wand wove an intricate dance, spells strung together where the ending point of one curse's wand movement was the starting point of his next spell,

casting a fullisade of dark curses that would have scattered a full team of battle hardened aurors.

Dumbledore stopped it all with a single, wordless shield, while commenting dryly, "Ah yes, Tom. I recognize that attack sequence, a spell string you first used in public on May 14th of the first year of your initial rise to power. Frightened a whole auror brigade into retreat, leaving behind two casualties. One of the defining moments in your becoming an acclaimed dark lord. I don't think you ever realized, Tom, just how much play acting I used to contribute to your rise to power. You have been my toy all along, Tom. While I pretended to take you seriously, others would take you seriously. And while all those tiny minds focused on you I could be plundering both sides of their wealth and privileges indiscriminately."

Rather than slacking the pace Voldemort reached more deeply for power and strove still harder, flinging spells all the more quickly. Bludgeoners, cutters, and flame spells of every description played host to even more damaging curses, all intermixed with offhand wandless hexes.

And Unforgivables became something like every third spell.

One of the reasons Voldemort was so feared is because casting the killing curse had become natural for him. He could cast it quickly and repeatedly, unlike most everyone else. And his Crucio was even faster yet (a small part of him privately admitted that a part of that must be the plenty of practice he got using it on his followers).

Dumbledore countered it all easily, effortlessly. No matter what the Dark Slytherin did, the ancient Headmaster countered it or simply sidestepped with as little concern as though he was passing a student in a hall. "I hope you will forgive an old man his weaknesses, but we do have a tendency to ramble along. That string was first used on the Christmas Ball ambush that slaughtered thirty four Light students and their families, wasn't it? Lord Potter, grandfather to our current Harry, fought you then, did he not? All to no avail? You know, the weakness of spell strings is that they only offer any advantage in speed when they also are kept a surprise. When your foe has seen them before he knows your next move before you make it, canceling

the benefit. When you leave any witness alive, even your own followers, the memory can be plucked out and studied. Then you're simply advertising what you intend to do and your target has all the time in the world to counter. But you never did pay much attention to History, or you would've known that."

Dumbledore sighed, shaking his head as though he had not just caused a pot of geraniums to leap into the path of a killing curse aimed at his face. "Alas, it was necessary to deceive you too, Tom, as if you didn't believe you and I were near equals you never would have felt confident to try to conquer our world and create the distress I needed. In reality you never had a tenth of my power or skill, even at your best. But it was important that the world feared you, so I acted out a role showcasing you as a true threat. I could have done as much playing opposite a jellyfish, indeed I was discretely helping Lucius groom Fudge for the role, but you were kind enough to present yourself at a convenient moment."

Riddle cast a hail of arrows, summonings, banishings, hostile transfigurations animating the floor around him, jets of acid, killing curses, other Unforgivable curses, and assorted other dark curses at the Headmaster in an unending stream of spellfire out of both hands. The pace was exhausting and the drain on his magic reserves critical.

Nevertheless, Voldemort had trained to where he could keep up a pace like this longer than any other wizard.

Dumbledore tsked, sounding disappointed, and stopped playing around, letting the spells splash harmlessly off his shield while his own transfigurations took care of the rest. He spoke as though scolding a child for wetting the bed. "It is an obscure fact, Tom, but a simple Protego can be fine-tuned to deflect certain spells far more efficiently, at a slight cost to others. However when you know your opponent's spell strings you have advance notice of each and every attack he delivers. Why then it is as simple as humming a tune to get the counters specialized and his attack costs you virtually nothing to defend against. I've seen memories of your strings played out enough times that I know what spells you will deliver, and how long it takes you to cast each one. You have no secrets from me, Tom."

Having seen too many of his Unforgivables blocked by animated monkeys throwing stones to intercept them, monkeys that the Headmaster had cast long ago and that hadn't destroyed themselves blocking, so didn't need replacing, Lord Voldemort paused only briefly before resuming in a completely wild and random attack.

Dumbledore allowed himself to smile as once more he countered it all with the barest traces of effort. "Ah, and now we get to the final weakness of spell strings, in that deeply ingraining reflexes to get the necessary speed that is the whole perceived benefit inevitably teaches you to react in patterns, and overcoming those patterns once they are in place leaves you slower and, yes, more predictable than if you had never learned to chain your spells together into the set forms of attack sequences. Combo attacks fourteen moves long are not an advantage, Tom, they are dull and predictable. Yet learning to do them robs you of creativity and innovation that even novice spellcasters have. Many an accomplished duelist will spend his entire career hoping to avoid giving any clue at all, yet by your second spell I often know what your next twenty will be. As you frequently have favorites even among strings and all unknowing follow one string with the same one you chased it with before often enough they practically become part of the same sequence. Here you are trying to break up and diversify your assault on me, yet I see that was part four through six of a combo you are rather fond of, and that was the shortest of the broken chains you are trying to throw at me. The one before that was almost eight moves long. I can bet on each spell to be followed by the ones you normally would and be right more often than not, Tom."

Now forced to rest a bit longer than he would have normally allowed, the Dark Lord Voldemort decided he'd had enough of letting this pompous windbag get all the good insults in. If the old fool wanted to banter he could make use of that opportunity to conceal a bit of momentary recovery. "You go on about the perfection of duelists, yet how many have I killed? Sixty?"

There went on that grandfatherly smile. "Ah, Tom. Once upon a time that would have been worth twenty points to Slytherin. Sad how those times have changed. No, I made no claim dueling experts are perfect. They merely have one tool, practicing a completely unpredictable fighting style. However their weakness is rather large in its own way,

in that they are totally unprepared to meet several skilled opponents at once - an environment your attacks all too often fostered. Even if you did not mean to, the distraction of combat going on all around them often unnerved those used to fighting alone."

Then, without any indication he was going to cast, the old man sent a silent spell that came completely without any warning telltales and smashed Tom Riddle's body up against the far wall with the force of a wrecking ball.

Half the bones in his body were broken and he'd never seen it coming. No chance to block, counter or dodge, it was just THERE! Voldemort's first idea something was wrong, it had already hit him.

And it was agony.

"Of course," the Headmaster said smugly, walking forward calmly as though he was teaching a class instead of in a life or death struggle. "It is possible to train for both advantages without the associated weaknesses."

He gazed down fondly on his downed enemy while Voldemort struggled simply to lift his wand and point it towards his genial foe as Dumbledore came to loom over him. "You see, Tom, ultimately the reason you are here is that it was important for my schemes that there be a crisis, an emergency to use as an excuse to gather wealth and power. Contented, happy people have no reasons to enter into bad deals. But scared, frightened people in need of protection? Oh, they will give up anything in return for a little, temporary safety. So I merely fought you to draws instead of beating you like an unwanted stepchild, as I could've. Instead I went on pretending that you were a much greater threat than you ever were. Now, however, it is important that you understand your place - which is below me! You are less than the worms under my feet, Tom. I could destroy you at my pleasure. Currently, it pleases me to leave you alive to serve me. What do you say?"

Panting, the Dark Lord Voldemort opened his hand, dropping his wand. Then, as he saw the old fool beam him a smile he shot off from

his other hand, still poised, a quick unforgivable killing curse at point blank range.

This time Dumbledore made no pretense of defense. He didn't even try to dodge, taking it full on, and it did nothing to him, not even shut him up. "Ah, yes, the much vaunted killing curse. Since you stopped training them your followers would have been nothing without it. Unblockable and instant death. They needed no other spell to duel with. However, a protection against it was discovered - a boy who not only survived the curse, he reflected it back on you."

Dumbledore laughed, pulling out of his robes a necklace, revealing a silver amulet marked with a lightning bolt rune glowing from within with an emerald light, which he dangled teasingly before his victim. "I have been draining magic out of Harry Potter for more than a decade, Tom; using it, as you might surmise, to create amulets like this one - perfect protection against the killing curse. You may as well scream insults. They are more likely to hurt me. Sadly, I have not yet developed one that can reflect that curse instead of merely block it. However, blocking it is perfectly useful. Perhaps, if you serve me well, you might be gifted with one of these yourself, eventually."

He was hit by an Imperio before he could even finish speaking.

Dumbledore tsked again, body flinching at contact with a Crucio before he teased the Dark Slytherin about them in order. "Oh, Tom. The Imperious Curse is only of use on the weak minded, which sadly includes most wizards, but not myself. You should have known better than to try it. Also the Crucio has its own weaknesses, and there are defenses against it. Perhaps, if you serve me well enough, I may even describe them to you."

Lord Voldemort lay panting on the ground, body broken, staring in horrified disbelief at the man who'd taken all three of his unforgivables, only to prove they were all perfectly useless on him. He'd taken them all, smiling.

It was at that point Tom realized he was beaten, just as the old man said.

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Author's Notes:

Scary, huh?

Even if none of the 'magic' leached out of the replacement child left at the Dursleys was the real deal, Dumbledore had enough to work with while draining Harry at school to create those amulets. He's just got less of a stockpile of that energy than he thinks.

Oh, and in case you didn't realize, Harry's great advantage is that he has Voldemort's skills (except he doesn't even have all of them, because there are a substantial number of dark arts he could never bring himself to use). So everything Dumbledore just did to Voldemort, he could do to Harry if they were to fight openly.

But I figure nearly two centuries of nonstop studying have got to be worth something. Give a Ravenclaw time and access to near infinite resources to study from, and they OUGHT to be scary!!

Oh, and don't forget, he wasn't using the Elder Wand here.

Partially Kissed Hero
Chapter Seventy-Eight
by Lionheart

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While the young teens were going through 'recall shock', Trelawney acted to remove the disfiguring potion on Harry. It was the mirror image of the one they'd used on Dudley's twin - just like they'd caused that boy to look like Harry, they'd given Harry a potion to look like his poor abused cousin looking like him so he would not draw attention of the Headmaster by coming to Hogwarts not looking sufficiently abused.

Harry's trip to St. Mungo's at the start of this year to get diagnosed for his maltreatment had been a complicated bit of tomfoolery, taking his cousin there sans potion and switching their results, along with a minor Confundus charm or two on certain Healers, but it had worked out fine.

The real Harry was anything but the poor abused orphan boy Dumbledore had planned on. Those in the know about the dryads' plans had been using that sleep walking spell to get workouts for years, and since he was a child Harry had been trained in martial arts by Sybil's personal trainer - Bruce Lee (who was the only muggle she'd put money on in a bare knuckle fight against a troll) along with all of his girls, of course.

They could hardly get more fit.

No, if Harry thought he was a solid brick of wiry muscle before, due to all of his garden work for the Dursleys... well, that had nothing on this!

That done, she had a moment to consider her recent accomplishments. Not surprisingly, since much of her work had been tied to space, she had been involved in many of their greatest achievements, so the latest news there was of interest to her.

As part of the 'last gasp' of the space exploration program, they were sending missions to go around retrieving important historical artifacts

so they could be properly displayed on Earth after they withdrew most of their activities to Luna orbit or so due to the cost - and of course the single most important artifacts were those original golden acorns!

Priceless historical relics.

Many efforts had been made in political arenas before this to retrieve them, but there were always more scientifically significant goals to accomplish. Now astronauts were as sentimental as the next guy, but in the rush to do and achieve more and greater heights than ever before, going back to get those acorns was often a low-priority goal.

They'd considered it, they'd weighed the costs countless times before now, but the momentum had been going in other directions, space telescopes and labs, new landings and deeper understanding of exciting new data. Benefit to mankind over nifty souvenirs, as one administrator called it.

So it was only now that it was acknowledged that the space program funding was drying up and their activities more and more curtailed, that they went out to get some of the most priceless memorabilia of those early missions.

Thus, a Mars rover en route from the Polar Base (where there was plenty of water in the ice cap to convert over to station use) had gone on the long drive to the original impact site of the 1960's probe. It was, as far as such missions went, fairly dull and boring. The Mars surface had been accurately mapped from space, and they'd had countless drives around to collect samples to study. This one, while longer range than most, was not even passing over anything terribly interesting, although they did keep up their routines of stopping to sample and record data at regular intervals on their trip, just because space agencies tend to be thorough about things.

It was when the rover crested the last ridge and they were able to overlook the original probe landing site that the international news went nuts.

There was, on TV, the space channel, where live transmissions from various missions could be seen by all and sundry, and this trip to

recover the original Mars Acorn had received more notice than most (although still not a tenth as much as your average prime time comedy, and most of those viewers had changed channels to watch this new fairy hoax or scam going on in England).

All of that changed in a heartbeat when the six-wheeled, two passenger rover crested a hill for the first direct shot of the original probe site since the lander itself stopped functioning, and bedlam broke loose, because when they got in range to see it there was NOT the expected crater and landing vehicle.

No, instead the rover and its startled crew transmitted back shots of a lush garden. Trees, flowers, grass, along with a crystal palace nestled inside of the greenery, all existing unprotected out in the open. Fountains of open water and terrestrial animals could also be observed in among the trees.

The physical impossibility of the scene did nothing to deny its reality.

Brief but thorough checks to ensure this was not a fake were progressing while men in positions of authority were gotten out of bed. Politicians and scientists got rolled out of their blankets while the astronauts sat in their rover directing every measuring device they had to the impossible garden, under orders not to proceed until the right people were brought up to speed.

The US President was also woken up and briefed. Nor was he alone. Across the world, leaders of all stripes were being informed by breathless aids.

While this was going on, and before anyone had made any decisions regarding the matter, the duplicate Queen Sybil had tasked with taking care of her political affairs was one of those who got woken up by frantic underlings. The underling in this case was a wizard, and her bed in a magical home in a secure village, but the muggles of her country were calling and being quite insistent they reach her. So she got up, and the Mother of Space Exploration, the Star Queen, got informed of their little discovery.

Naturally she knew what was going on from the very first moment they began to describe the situation, and when the simulacrum informed the original the dryad was not surprised. She knew what they would find if they went after those original acorns. The fact that they had found it did nothing to surprise her. They'd proposed doing something like this countless enough times that her plans were laid in place long ago.

Now in this situation she had two options. One, she could be honest, explain to the muggles the situation about the fairy being nearly extinct on Earth, be helpful, friendly, and open.

Or she could be a fairy about it - and fairies are tricksters.

Oh the PLAN was still to tell them, be honest and helpful and friendly and all of that, but only after pulling a monumental joke on all of them, and this was truly a priceless opportunity.

After all, the great strides made in space and the initial excitement about the exploration of planets had influenced their television shows and art as much as the scientific community's knowledge base.

Seeing Harry and his friends would still be dealing with the shock of their new memories over the next few minutes, she saw that she had time, so she got dressed in her costume, calling most of her dryad friends to go with her - all in their natural, super-attractive dryad forms. So, dressed in their very best dresses with magical embroidery that moved on its own, they zapped off to their trees on Mars and went to meet some astronauts.

The brass of the space program were still getting their act together, dusting off old first contact plans or alternatively preparing for war, when the site of all of this excitement got even more exciting, and the astronauts in the rover called home with great urgency repeating their pleas for instructions.

One of Sybil's favorite TV programs had lasted longer than M.A.S.H. had in the original timeline, and was of course about space. So it was with a great deal of amusement that she and her fellows among the original dryads went walking forth on the barren surface of the red

planet, unprotected by mortal means from thin atmosphere, magical slippers not even getting dust on their feet as their magical gowns twinkled in the low light, forming a procession with her at the head as they walked forth out of the garden and approached the Mars rover with its stunned crew.

Stopping a safe distance away before anybody freaked, Trelawney raised her hand in a very familiar gesture and spoke the first words ever heard by Earthman from an alien (or so they supposed).

"Live Long, and Prosper," Queen Sybil said, raising the Vulcan hand symbol.

Her pointed ears suddenly took on whole new worlds of significance.

One of the astronauts, acting in defiance of the non-orders of the brass, also rose to meet her, getting out of the high-sprung vehicle to approach to stand a safe yet comfortable distance away and repeated the sign back to her - to the breathless amazement of the television viewers back home as the glove of his spacesuit formed the familiar symbol back to her while his buddy made sure the cameras caught every historic moment.

Sadly, his helmet was only equipped with a radio, not speakers. But she had a Wizarding Wireless receiver adapted to pick up those signals enchanted into her earrings (they had been planning this for a long time, and aware of the problem), so she heard as the brave man returned the greeting to her.

Back home on Earth NASA now had experts busy calling up trekkies who spoke the Vulcan language made up for the TV show. They didn't know if that would do any good, but they didn't know that it wouldn't either, and most of their first contact plans had just gotten thrown out of the window anyway.

Amusement twinkled out of every aspect of Sybil's face and mannerisms as she told the astronauts, "We'd invite you inside, but our fields that maintain normal atmosphere and gravity are deadly to your electronics. So if you were to approach much closer it would destroy your equipment and you'd be unable to leave or to transmit

data home - save perhaps by postcard. But as your instruments would perish as well, there'd not be much you'd be recording."

The brave astronaut (whose name was Jack Ryan, and thus would lead to a whole generation of young boys whose names were either Jack or Ryan) then asked, "What can you tell us of your culture?"

Trelawney tsked, highly amused, as she cocked her head playfully. "Now that would be telling! And that would defeat the entire purpose of getting you out here in space in the first place. You are supposed to discover the answers on your own, grow as a species, and so on."

Now this astronaut was not slow on the uptake, but they were taught to be thorough, so he clarified for the audience back home, "Do you mean to say that you or your people were somehow behind our reach into space?"

"Yes." She nodded naturally, and at ease. "You see," she then morphed back into the form she'd been using for years. "My name on Earth is Queen Sybil of Cuba, the Star Queen and other such titles. I shall leave my affairs there in the hands of capable agents, as your next task is to reach me here, not there. And you shall do so once you have completed one of three tests, each with its own reward. This," she produced a clear crystal vial apparently from thin air (and the air up there was very thin to start with), "Is called Phoenix Tears, and can cure any injury, poison or disease with just a few drops. Many of your leaders would do anything for a sample. They may have this, enough for two hundred doses that will effectively cure anything, when the three incomplete Super-Orions have been launched on their stated missions."

Next she drew out a puzzle box made of nearly indestructible wood. "Inside this is the answer to your difficulties with the travel time. The medicine," she did not call it Draught of the Living Death, although that's what it was, "will cause any human to take a dose to enter a state of perfect suspended animation. They could sleep for thousands of years, if required. Each vial is one dose, enough for two doses for each of the astronauts of a fully crewed mission for each ship, and the antidotes the same. That way you may send the ships without fear of the crews dying of old age before they reach their targets, and

rotate through who spends a year or two awake monitoring the mission and gathering data, then returning to sleep for the rest of the trip."

She smiled at the astronaut. "The test here is twofold: first the puzzle box, which shall not be easy, the second is one of honesty. Will you use this for the purpose for which it was intended? If you do not, I shall know, and the cancer cures on Cuba will stop. Once you open the box I shall meet you again out here to answer any reasonable questions. Just as I'll meet you after launch to deliver the vial of phoenix tears."

"And the third test?" Astronaut Ryan asked after a short pause.

Queen Sybil smiled up at the taller man. "Is to accurately describe what happens when I do this."

Then, along with sparkles not unlike a Star Trek transporter effect, she and the other dryads vanished, leaving only their footprints, one puzzle box, two stunned astronauts and their rover behind.

The garden glistened in the distance, the mystery of its survival still unexplained.

That was Ok, Mars Base was already scrambling every team they had, calling off other missions around the planet to reallocate resources to the new site. They'd be building a new base within spitting distance of the miraculous garden within days. Missions were already getting prepped back on Earth to go reinforce them as ships scheduled for decommission got reactivated.

If nothing else, they would be doing exhaustive research into those 'fields' she'd referred to that could hold in perfect Earth-normal conditions on a planet very unlike Earth in important and fundamental ways like atmosphere and gravity.

Light and heat science could manage, but air without walls to hold it in and gravity (whatever the source), and they had science fiction staring them in the face - and they were GOING to research it!

Including dozens of sacrificial probes to see at precisely what distance their fields destroyed human electronics (they found it was variable).

All of a sudden, new interest got injected into the space program. People stop investing in things when they no longer feel the return is worth their effort and expense. They'd felt they'd learned all they could reasonable get from space, and all of a sudden so many more possibilities were staring them in the face, proving there was so much more to learn. And it would only get more exciting as similar discoveries were made on Venus, then Mercury and all of the other probe sites that weren't asteroids or gas giants.

Public, government and scientific interest in space spiked like never before, especially when their flybys caught sight of anomalies on Neptune that on closer inspection by some of those very high power telescopes were revealed to be islands floating on the gaseous surface.

Pretty much like Cloud City out of Star Wars.

Gas giants were a little unsettling to live on, as Sybil knew from experience. An acorn dropped into that atmosphere came to rest at a point where it was no longer heavy or dense enough to sink, which wasn't very far because of the featherweight charms meant to stop them from being crushed on impact with more solid bodies. Then the trees deployed from there. Lack of dirt was not a problem for the spells nourishing their plants (thanks to those Potter spells), but it was a bit odd to float unsupported there in the atmospheric soup, so they'd moved enough dirt using the set of vanishing cabinets they were lucky enough to find (one in Hogwarts, one in Borgin and Burke's) to form artificial islands for them to root in, then linked those together until they had floating gardens, complete with the requisite crystal palaces.

To make it feel more homey.

The 60-acre giant fiber mats enchanted as flying carpets they'd added to help support all of that weight had cost a pretty penny. Though theoretically they were hardly needed, as sinking a bit lower

in the clouds was not deadly, and the combined featherweight and deep pressure survival charms worked into the trees themselves would prevent them from being dragged down too far or crushed even if they did. Thanks to the spells of Harry's family they were immune to the weather and a bubblehead charm was able to form and keep a bubble of air despite the pressure of being underwater - so it was easy enough to keep out other gasses at any pressure to which the trees were able to sink. So, while a little weird, it was perfectly livable.

That house-sized bubblehead charm was actually priceless on Venus, as it didn't matter if it rained acid, they had their own little bubbles of Earth-normal conditions to dwell inside.

Asteroids were almost the reverse problem to the gas giants, no gravity or pressure instead of too much, but they'd already begun working on linking them together to create a sane and respectable planet to live on.

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Harry got shaken out of his realizations and recollections by the newly returned Queen Sybil once more drawing everyone's attention to herself in the manner of those great celebrities who inherently knew the spotlight belonged on them anyway - with ease of great practice.

"Now we have a lot to cover to get everyone up to speed at last, but I have one or two little surprises for everyone first. Operating in the midst of Dumbledore's back yard was insane and suicide, but despite that I was able to pull off one or two little operations," she crowed proudly, producing a small blue ball. "This, for example, is my best one."

"What is it?" Susan asked. In both histories the little blonde girl was very much the same personality-wise, it's just in the new set she was far greater friends with this crowd, and thus more comfortable among them.

The senior dryad preened. "Why, nothing more than the other half of Moody's magical eye."

She was surrounded by vast confusion, so explained. "Auror and Hit Wizard 'Mad-Eye' Moody is one of Dumbledore's most trusted servants. He is so named because of a missing eye whose socket he has filled with a magical replacement that can see through anything and look in any direction. This makes him very hard to ambush or surprise. And also enables him to act as a superlative scout, and he is frequently used to observe enemy actions."

Hermione perked up. "So, if Dumbledore uses him to perform reconnaissance on his enemies, it will be a useful thing to know if he starts observing us!"

"He is also paranoid to a fault," Minerva observed dryly. "How did you slip something by him?"

"Oh, as simple as anything," Sybil shrugged in false modesty. "I knew that he didn't have the skills necessary to craft the magical replacement eye he wears. His talents lie in entirely different directions. So naturally he had to have someone else create it for him. Dumbledore would have been his first choice, but back during the war when Moody lost his original that man was too busy snatching up properties right and left to spare the time to craft a replacement eye for his servant. So he would have bought one. Since these are all special-made, and VERY few have the necessary talents, it wasn't too hard to place a few simulacrums very early on and ensure that they were the only good options available at the time I knew he needed the work done. He killed the one who did the work, naturally, to cover up his secrets."

"How did you even get the idea?" Aurora asked curiously.

"Actually a phrase out of a muggle game: no matter how tough the cyborg, he is at the mercy of his cybertechnician. You can't bully a man who makes your arms work, because sooner or later you'll be helpless on a table while he works on whatever's broken - and you'd better hope he likes you enough to let you get back up again." Sybil wasn't smug at all. Oh, no sir!

"Nevertheless, Albus would've checked over the work thoroughly, as would Moody independently." Minerva remained skeptical.

"Yes, and they did. However the eye does nothing but collect data and pass it on - exactly as it should. It has no other spells or properties than that. I didn't turn it into a cortex bomb, or secret remote override or anything."

"Mores the pity," they overheard Poppy whisper.

"Quite," Sybil agreed, triumphant. "However, as the one to enchant this thing I know exactly how it functions, and how to stop it from seeing what I don't want it to see. But that's neither here nor there."

Hefting the blue orb in her hand, she explained, "The main point of doing this was not to hide our secrets, although that is a nice benefit. It is that Albus often uses this man to spy out information for him. The eye DOESN'T do anything but what it should - gather information. And that information only gets collected in eye itself before being transmitted through contact, exactly as they specified."

Hermione grinned. "Oh, I see! You just said that orb in your hand is the other half of that eye! That means they don't have all of it, and you have a backdoor into the system, so access to the information it collects!"

"Exactly!" Queen Sybil crowed. "Magically this small piece of enchanted rock is still a part of the eye Moody has been wearing for years now. So what he sees is observable through this, although that doesn't work the other way around. He can't see through this end. I got the idea from a muggle wire tap. Phones on both ends still work properly, but the conversation is overheard by a third party. That's essentially all this does."

"But, as one of Dumbledore's most trusted agents, Moody would often be in a position to see sensitive things," Minerva couldn't resist a smirk.

"Exactly!" Queen Sybil crowed. "I've got it hooked up to a recording pensieve, one able to play it back at high speed, so can review it at my leisure and save out what's important."

"That's ingenious!" Hermione exclaimed, clapping her hands excitedly.

The Divination professor accepted the praise with a shrug. "Well, it simply struck me that Albus is an information junky for a reason. Knowledge IS power! And with a little insight into what one of his most trusted agents was doing, we'd have a little access to what the man himself knows. Nothing perfect, I know, but a taste of what to look into in more detail."

"So what is he doing now? Can we see?"

Nodding to Hermione's request, seeing the others were still a bit dazed by their recovered memories (although that girl's past was far from unchanged, she'd always dealt with the memory assimilation better than the others), Sybil activated the projection feature of the orb's holder.

Thus, played out before an increasingly horrified audience, was Dumbledore's fight against Voldemort as Moody discretely watched from a distance.

Dumbledore knew that his servant was spying on him, naturally, but neither of them knew that others were spying on them through him. So the crowd of fairy champions and dryads learned a great deal from that encounter, and all of it chilled them to their bones as they watched it play out from start to finish, with Dumbledore boasting the whole while (yes, the eye had sound, listening at a distance was one of the features Moody'd ordered).

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Author's Notes:

It's what you don't know that's far more liable to kill you than what you do know about. Having Dumbledore able to thrash Voldemort is one thing, but having Harry aware of that possibility at least lets him to

know to avoid that fate himself, if possible.

It's little tricks like that that keep this whole scenario manageable.

Controlling who has surprise has been a big factor. After all, a snake in the grass that suddenly strikes your ankle is one thing, and pretty much certain death the moment it happens. But a snake that has to advance across thirty yards of bare concrete to assault the alert guards of a flamethrower nest is quite another. Same snake, different odds of success.

Or a snake vs you in a footrace is another scenario entirely. Circumstances can do a great deal to balance out power levels.

And I couldn't let them do all of that past manipulating without getting some advantage from it! Of course, as I stated before Moody has been careful NOT to know the locations of Dumbledore's horcruxes, but oh well.

CHP79